"PEOPLE MAKE FILMS ABOUT THEMSELVES": RACE, IDENTITY, AND (RE)WRITING HISTORY IN JULIE DASH'S *ILLUSIONS* (1983) AND *DAUGHTERS OF THE DUST* (1991)

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Abstract

This thesis explores how history is (re)written alongside representations of race, place, and the "self" in Julie Dash's films *Illusions* (1983) and *Daughters of the Dust* (1991). Although Dash was the first Black American female filmmaker to have a feature film released theatrically in the United States, her work is often left out of traditional narratives of film history, signaling the continuation of racism and sexism in the mainstream film industry. Through a close analysis of Dash's films, and her role in the Black independent film movement, I argue that Dash's narrative approach creatively blends history, myth, and auto/biography, and thus works to reimagine, redefine, and rewrite the history of Black Americans. In an attempt to reinscribe Dash as a significant figure in U.S. history, this thesis puts Dash's work in conversation with writers and thinkers from such fields as film studies, literature, and Black geographies, allowing for an interdisciplinary analysis of race, place, and Black feminist subjectivity in Dash's pivotal films.

Keywords: Black Independent Film, Race, Representation, Self-definition, Autobiography, Narrative, Myth, Archive, L.A. Rebellion

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Introduction:

Welcome to the Beyhive

The past and future merge to meet us here.
Beyoncé Knowles-Carter (*Lemonade*)

"Welcome to the Beyhive." These are the words Julie Dash found flashing on her phone screen in late April 2016 (Desta). It was a tweet from her daughter, N'zinga. Mystified by her daughter's message, Dash asked, "What are you talking about?" (qtd. in Buckley). N'zinga was commenting on her mother's most recent induction into American singer Beyoncé Knowles-Carter's fandom (Desta). Beyoncé's visual album, *Lemonade* (2016) had just been released, and audiences were noticing deep visual and thematic connections to Dash's 1991 film, *Daughters of the Dust* (Buckley; Desta; Murphy; Wallace). As journalist Mekado Murphy (2016) described it, "the new Beyoncé album mixed 'Lemonade' with a little 'Dust.'"

Written and directed by Julie Dash, *Daughters of the Dust* chronicles three generations of a Gullah family at the turn of the century – the Peazants – as they prepare to leave their home on the Sea Islands of the Southeastern United States for the promise of 'progress' in the industrial north. As descendants of West Africans forced into the transatlantic slave trade, the Gullah, also known as Geechee, remained on the U.S. Sea Islands after the abolition of slavery in 1865. Due in part to their geographic isolation from the mainland, the Gullah retained many elements of their West African roots, including ritual, language, and spirituality (Alao 41-2; Dash, "Making *Daughters*" 6; Wardi 34). Dash effectively portrayed this fictional Gullah family at a critical point in

time when commitments to tradition, family, and place, were being questioned by the pull of modernity, freedom, and financial security.

Cultural critic Greg Tate describes the film as "the first translation of the sensibility found in contemporary Black women's literature to the screen" ("Homegirl Goddesses" 72). Drawing from the cultural, spiritual, and mythical histories of the Gullah, from which Dash is descended through her father, *Daughters* offers a poetic portrait of a family navigating the meanings of home and belonging as they find themselves torn between tradition and 'modernity' – between land and sea, family and fortune, past and future. The film was also praised for its portrayal of Black women in all their "shifting faces of dignity, denial, yearning, and elegance," as Tate writes, "that give shape and meaning to Black female subjectivity" ("Homegirl Goddesses" 72).[1] At the time of its release, it was considered unlike any other film to take on the "weight of black history" (Bastien). Lavish and lyrical, both visually and narratively, it offers a delicate and deep view of the unbreakable bonds between Black women (Bastien). As an unapologetic expression of Black experiences in the Diaspora – a celebration of language, aesthetic, and sensibility (Boston) – *Daughters* was considered a cultural landmark in U.S. film, and in 2004, was added to the National Film Registry by the Library of Congress (Desta; Martin, "I Do Exist" 3).

Dash found it surprising that, 25 years after its release, *Daughters of the Dust* began experiencing a renaissance. Just after Beyoncé's ground-breaking and highly

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[1] While the non-capitalized form of "black," or "African American," are common phrasings that refer to individuals of African descent, or those existing in the Black Diaspora, I opt for the capitalized form of the term in my writing except when referring to direct quotations or book titles. I discuss this choice in terminology in more detail later in this chapter.

popular visual album *Lemonade* was released in April 2016, Dash found her website had been shut down. There was a surge in traffic causing it to crash. She also found herself flooded with notifications about "Daughters of the Dust" trending on Twitter (Desta). Although she believed this all to be a mistake, it turns out that audiences – her daughter, N'zinga, included – were noticing similarities between Beyoncé's visual album and Dash's feature film, which sparked a renewed interest in Dash and her work.

Like *Daughters*, *Lemonade* was praised by fans and critics alike as a testament to Black women's tenacity, beauty, and self-empowerment. While the album chronicles the rupture and eventual reconciliation between Beyoncé and her husband, Jay-Z, it is at its heart a "visual tone poem" about how Black women (re)imagine, (re)define, and (re)claim their place in the histories, geographies, and stories of the U.S. (Desta). Scholar LaKisha Michelle Simmons (2016) writes that "Beyoncé's representation of madness, jealousy, anger, and hurt are intertwined with the madness and pain inherited from our antebellum past." And it is through the landscape of the south – remnants of former slave cabins and sugar plantations – that we find the poetic hauntings of the history of slavery (Simmons). We see the dreamy imagery of the Old South – images first brought to a cinematic light by Julie Dash – marshes with dark, mysterious waters, and oak trees with branches reaching with twists and turns, as if "petrified life" (Benjamin qtd. in Stoler 194).

Perhaps the most gripping similarity between Dash's film and the visual album – both of which might be understood as visual tone poems (Buckley; Desta) – is the presence of Black women, striking in their stark, white dresses, as they navigate these ruins of history. Beyoncé defiantly moves through this space, alongside other Black women – sitting, standing, and dancing in the very space where their ancestors were once

enslaved. It is a place where they do not "belong," and yet, it is through their very presence that they reclaim it (Simmons; see also Larkin 168). Against this haunting, colonial backdrop, Beyoncé utters the words, "The past and future merge to meet us here" (qtd. in Simmons). Indeed, history persists through place, through bodies, and through stories. It persists because of, and in spite of, the influence of racist and colonial histories upon Black women's lives in the United States. So too, might we think of the past and future merging in this artistic convergence of Dash and Beyoncé, 25 years between the releases of their revolutionary works. Each is a commentary on the effects – and affects – of slavery that seep into contemporary lives, but through the lens of the Black women who continue to live, love, and work for a better future, in spite of the pain of the past (Simmons).

Julie Dash was born in New York City in 1952. As one of the leading figures of Black independent cinema, she helped revolutionize the representation of Black Americans in cinema by actively (re)writing the narratives of self, nation, and history. This Black independent film movement, later dubbed the "L.A. Rebellion," spanned the late 1960s to the 1980s and was comprised of a group of young and vibrant film students at UCLA – Julie Dash included – who were determined to reimage, rewrite, and reshape the images and stories of Black individuals and their communities (Field et al. 1-2; Martin, "I Do Exist" 2). Dash also became the first Black woman filmmaker in the United States to receive wide theatrical release for her first feature film, *Daughters of the Dust* (1991), which film critic Stephen Holden described as "a film of spellbinding visual beauty." Despite these tremendous accolades (which most would argue came uncomfortably late in

the relatively short history of cinema), Dash was largely shut out of Hollywood, as she faced difficulty securing funding for future projects (Buckley; Felsenthal; Martin, "I Do Exist" 3). As Dash recalled, "We pitched Octavia Butler's books, Harlem Renaissance stories, contemporary love stories," adding, "And then they would say that no one ever pitched to them. I still have those [rejection] letters" (qtd. in Boston; see also Buckley). Later in the 1990s, Dash found work with music videos, short films, and television, directing *The Rosa Parks Story* (2002) for CBS (Martin, "I Do Exist" 3). More recently, she has held teaching positions for cinema and media studies college programs (Boston).

Although *Daughters* was released to "capacity crowds" during its initial release, and has continued to fill theatres for screenings, Dash felt it was never the right time or place for her in the film industry (Buckley). She says, "The problem is that African American films are only allowed to be 'this' or 'that,' depending upon when they need 'this' or 'that'" (qtd. in Martin, "I Do Exist" 6). The 1990s were a competitive time for Black filmmakers, as Hollywood was most interested in "testosterone films," or "homeboy films from the hood," as Dash describes it (qtd. in Martin, "I Do Exist" 14-15). In other words, these were films that did not prioritize women's perspectives, either in front of, or behind the camera. With the undeniable realities of race and gender underlying access to creative roles in filmmaking, we might ask, just as Dash herself does, "Who's deciding on which films will be made and which will not? What kinds of films are being made and why? Who is the audience?" (qtd. in Martin, "I Do Exist" 5) Indeed, films are being made, but *whose* stories are being told?

Although Beyoncé has not explicitly discussed the influence of Dash on her visual album, many critics were quick to identify the artistic and thematic connections between

Lemonade and *Daughters of the Dust* (Boston; Bradshaw; Desta; Felsenthal; Spilker; Wallace). And for Dash, "the comparisons to 'Lemonade' feel natural" (Boston). Even Melina Matsoukas, the Grammy Award-winning director of Beyoncé's "Formation," one of the hit music videos from *Lemonade*, credits Dash as having an influence on her own career. She says:

> I remember seeing this film ["Daughters"] at a very young age […] It really helped shape my ideas about what film could be because it felt so different than anything I had seen before. … I was mesmerized by its distinct voice and how authentic … it was to that time and place. It was reassuring as a black person to see that our stories have value on screen. (qtd. in Boston; ellipses in original)

In response to this revival of her landmark film through *Lemonade*, Dash praises Beyoncé on her artistic ability to "reimagine and redefine the diaspora" through a "visual tone poem," adding, "[*Lemonade*] took me places that I had not been seeing in a long, long time. It just re-confirmed a lot of things that I know to be true about visual style and visual metaphors. And the use of visual metaphors in creating, redefining, and re-framing a Creole culture within this new world" (Dash qtd. in Desta). We see how Beyoncé's utterance: "The past and future merge to meet us here" extends through this reciprocal "circle of artists" (Boston). The past blends into the future, and the future, into the past. Indeed, Beyoncé's statement hearkens back to a quote Dash features on the dedication page of her book on the making of *Daughters*: "Every woman extends backward into her mother and forward into her daughter" (Jung qtd. in Dash, *Daughters* v; see also Boston).

This notion of "creating," "redefining," and "reframing" the Black experience in the United States, through the past, present, and future, is at the heart of my own research

journey. While I have long been interested in the underrepresentation of female filmmakers, particularly in the United States, I believe that much of the discourse focuses on gender or race alone rather than on how they operate together. Even Dash found that many of the conversations surrounding her clash with Hollywood post-*Daughters* framed the conflict as an issue of race, while she maintains that it is actually a complex interplay between both race and gender (Martin, "I Do Exist" 14).

As such, I began to think about how a more thorough analysis of the intersectional complexity of both race and gender in Dash's films might help elucidate the significance of (re)claiming and (re)writing the self for Black women filmmakers in particular. As such, the following chapters examine the films of Julie Dash – specifically *Illusions* (1983) and *Daughters of the Dust* (1991) – through an auto/biographical lens, focusing particularly on how history is (re)written alongside representations of race, place, and the "self." Some of the questions that guide my research include: What is the relationship between race, identity, and history in Dash's films? How are experiences of home, belonging, and nation addressed through the film's geographies? And how might the feminist subjectivity of Dash's narratives act as a reclamation of a history from which Black Americans have been traditionally excluded? If the popularity of *Lemonade* has taught us anything, it is that there is a desire for a (re)framing and (re)writing of Black female subjectivity through our screens, our stories, and our histories – personal, ancestral, and mythical.

People Make Films About Themselves

Set in 1942 Hollywood, *Illusions* follows Mignon Duprée, a Black woman who is able to 'pass' as white, which helps her secure an executive position at the fictional National Studios. When Ester Jeeter, another young Black woman, is brought into the studio to dub the singing voice of a white actress, the tensions between illusions and reality become increasingly evident. Along the way, Mignon takes Ester under her wing, deconstructing and challenging the issues of racism and sexism in Hollywood as they navigate the workings of the studio. While Mignon is a fictional character, Judylyn S. Ryan (2004) suggests that she actually acts as a stand-in for Dash herself – a stand-in that, by (re)claiming her Black identity within the film, allows Dash to (re)claim her positioning as a Black female director in an otherwise white-male dominated industry (1322; see also Mellencamp, "Making History" 83).

Like *Illusions*, *Daughters of the Dust* is also a fictional historical drama; however, as mentioned earlier, it is set in 1902 on the Sea Islands that line the coasts of South Carolina, Georgia, and Florida. It follows three generations of Gullah women, descendants of former slaves, as they prepare to migrate north and settle on the U.S. mainland. Highlighting the differences, as well as the connections, between younger and older generations, *Daughters of the Dust* explores the meanings that this migration holds, both in terms of preserving a cultural history, and the possibilities of a future for these Gullah women in the United States. By using fiction and myth to explore the past, Dash attempts to (re)write the history that is so often left out of textbooks. As both writer and director of these two films, Dash essentially aims to express, and expose, the untold sides of U.S. history – histories that reflect the realities of Black women's experiences. To

quote Mignon Duprée in *Illusions*, Dash uses "the power of the motion picture, for there are many stories to be told … and many battles to begin" (Dash, "Illusions" 212).

Near the end of *Illusions*, while discussing the complex relationship between history and filmmaking, the lead character, Mignon Duprée proclaims: "People make films about themselves" (Dash, "Illusions" 210). Here, Mignon is commenting on the exclusion of Black individuals (and more specifically, Black women) throughout Hollywood's white male dominated history. As such, when Black individuals actually were represented on the silver screen, they were usually misrepresented, causing their personal and cultural histories also to be misrepresented. But now, with Dash behind the camera, as writer and director, what does it mean to say: "People make films about themselves"? I aim to explore how this piece of dialogue is not only a critique of the U.S.'s largely white, male dominated film industry, but how it may also be a self-reflexive nod to Dash herself, who, as a Black female filmmaker, is now telling her own stories.

Dash's films have been the focus of much scholarly work, primarily within the context of independent and Black American film studies (Mellencamp, "Making History" 76-96; Ryan, "Outing" 1319-21 Reid 10-15; Taylor, *Mask of Art* 274-88; Wardi 45-59). However, there is a notable absence in literature that discusses how *Illusions* and *Daughters of the Dust* are interrelated from a feminist perspective, both in terms of their narrative content, as well as the social and historical contexts in which they were produced. Both of these films take a fictional approach to history, even as they draw on the reality of race and identity in America to make these stories come to life on the

screen. Although these films are set in different time periods and tell different stories, I argue that they both represent contemporary and historical experiences of race and identity in the United States. As well, I am interested in how Dash's subjective approach to historical, narrative filmmaking can be interpreted as resistance through her writing, and/or rewriting, of history.

To facilitate this investigation into the subjectivity of Julie Dash's films, I incorporate theories of autobiography and narrative into my research, while also situating her work in relation to actual examples of life writing. Discussions of women's autobiography in general often emphasize the practice of writing as being politically empowering. Jeanne Perreault and Marlene Kadar (2005) suggest that writing can be an expression of resistance: an act that allows first person subjects to challenge "oppression, trauma, and cultural norms" (5). Similarly, filmmaker and scholar Michelle Citron (1999) argues, "the autobiographical act is historically significant for women," because it is a means for women to explore particular histories that have been overshadowed by more dominant historical narratives (272). As such, Citron argues that the autobiographical act is a political act, a legitimate means of personal narrative that has been unjustly overlooked in fields of literature and cultural studies (272). In a similar sense, Barbara Myerhoff (1992) suggests that reflecting on life history through performance gives an opportunity "to write history as it should be or should have been, demonstrating a culture's notion of propriety and sense" (234). I argue that *Daughters of the Dust* and *Illusions* show how filmmaking can contribute to this narrative and performative exploration of personal, cultural, and national histories (ideas that I explore in more detail in Chapters 2-4).

On the theoretical potential of autobiographical writing, I take great inspiration from Dionne Brand's *A Map to the Door of No Return: Notes to Belonging* (2001). Brand's writing plays with notions of time, place, and origins, challenging traditional expectations of autobiographical linearity. Resistant to the boundaries of 'memoir' or 'autobiography,' Brand journeys through the muddy waters of poetry, history, and theory, working to (re-)map the complexities of identity, home, desire, and belonging in our ever-changing (post-)colonial world. On the autobiographical absences experienced by many in the Black Diaspora, Brand writes, "The African self so abiding yet so fearful because it was informed by colonial images of the African as savage and not by anything we could call on our memories to conjure" (*Map to the Door* 17). Writing in itself – and of the self – thus becomes an act of resistance. Resistance against the histories that systematically denied Black individuals and communities the freedom of self-definition. Like Brand, Dash broadens the chronological and cartographic possibilities of storytelling in order to re-centre the experiences of Black individuals – and women in particular – in order to reclaim their place in a nation haunted by a colonial past. Challenging the traditions of mainstream narratives – both literary and cinematic – Brand and Dash both explore the personal, ancestral, and national histories of slavery and colonialism through myth, memory, and fiction. It is through this creative rewriting of the past that both writers are able to reimagine and redefine a Black feminist subjectivity for the present and future. This relationship between self-definition through self-representation in image and story, and the reclamation of narrative silences in history, literature, and in cinema helps to guide my analyses of Dash's films.

While I draw from examples of women's life writing texts to help illuminate the theoretical and thematic threads of gender, race, and history in Dash's films, it is important to consider the particular autobiographical potential of film as a medium. A quote from Gabrielle Kelly and Cheryl Robson's *Celluloid Ceiling* (2014) helps to guide this aspect of my research journey: "Senegalese director Safi Faye realised she could communicate more effectively in visual images rather than words to overcome the multiple languages of her country and avoid using the language of France, the coloniser of her country" (12). Here, the visual provides an alternative venue through which to discuss notions of race and belonging, while also challenging the colonial and patriarchal influence upon language through the perpetuation of the "master's tools" (Lorde, *Sister Outsider* 112), a perspective I develop in relation to the Black Arts Movement of the 1960s and 1970s in Chapter 2.

Furthermore, by analyzing the relationships between race, identity and history in *Daughters of the Dust* and *Illusions* I draw attention to the wider, more systemic issues of racism and sexism in Hollywood, and the United States more broadly. There has been a burgeoning discussion concerning the underrepresentation of women working in the film industry in recent years, particularly in positions behind the camera (Hill 1-15; Kelly and Robson 9-18; Lauzen 1). While narrative filmmaking in particular is a highly collaborative art, the director is usually thought of as the author, or the 'auteur' of the film (Kelly and Robson 9). According to Kelly and Robson, "the director is the most important interpreter of a story that is developed, written, directed, edited and then brought to market" (9). The director of a film is a leader, an author, and above all, an artist. A director oversees the technical and artistic elements of a project, virtually granting him or

her complete control over the style and vision of the film (Kelly and Robson 9). With this kind of creative influence, one might ask who, indeed, gets to be a director? Unfortunately, statistics do not favour a diverse demographic for directorial positions in filmmaking. In 2017, women accounted for only 11% of directors in the top 250 grossing films of the year (Lauzen 1). This consistent underrepresentation of women working in scenes behind the camera has inspired the term "the celluloid ceiling" (Lauzen 1; see also Kelly and Robson 18).

However, while the celluloid ceiling is a very real concern for women, the reality is that "minority directors of *all* racial groups constitute less than 3 percent of the membership of the almost 4,000-member Directors' Guild of America" (Shohat and Stam 184; emphasis in original). With these kinds of numbers, it is no wonder that historically marginalized groups continue to feel powerless in the control of their own representations (Shohat and Stam 184). For such issues of representation, it is not just about 'woman' as a separate category, but also about the differences between, and across, categories of gender, race, and class.

In "The Triple Negation of Colored Women Artists," Adrian Piper (2003) argues that if we wish to challenge the lack of recognition of Black women artists – filmmakers included – we must turn our focus from the artist to the art (241). Although Julie Dash was the first Black American female filmmaker to have a feature film released theatrically, she has been reluctant to claim this title for herself, preferring instead to emphasize the community of Black women filmmakers of which she was a part (Dash, "Making *Daughters*" 26; Redding and Brownworth 192-3). As such, it is not my aim to focus specifically on Dash's biographical life, but rather, to consider the confluence of

life and film – of the relationship between self and story. For, as the following chapters will show, one cannot exist without the other. That being said, the majority of critical engagement with Dash's films have been largely limited to discourse within independent and Black American cinema, thus leaving it out of the wider canon of film history. By making theoretical, thematic, and historical connections across Dash's two pivotal films, I seek to draw attention to their critical relevance within various fields, including, but not limited to: film studies, gender studies, history, and feminist and Black geographies.

Illusions and *Daughters of the Dust* in Review

Much of the literature on Julie Dash focuses on her involvement with the Black independent film movement dubbed the "L.A. Rebellion" (Reid 11-12; Sheppard 230). The L.A. Rebellion refers to the "West Coast phenomenon" of the late 1960s and 1970s – inspired by the broader Black Arts movement of the time – that brought about a new wave of university-trained Black filmmakers (primarily students at UCLA), including Julie Dash, as well as Haile Gerima, Charles Burnett, Larry Clark, Billy Woodberry, and Alile Sharon Larkin (Reid 10-12; see also Field et al. 1-3). Feeling artistically and politically limited by mainstream American cinema, this new generation of filmmakers helped breathe life into Black independent filmmaking (Davis, "Future of Black Film" 449-51; Reid 10). Filmmakers of the L.A. Rebellion felt that a predominantly white Hollywood was not the place in which they could accurately represent their experiences of Black life on film (Reid 10-11). As such, students like Julie Dash created their own cinematic space outside of Hollywood, opting for independent production opportunities that would allow them to tell their own, unique stories. Although my research does not

centre on the L.A. Rebellion specifically, it is crucial to understand the social and historical context in which Dash developed as a filmmaker, as well as the environment in which her films were produced. As we can see from the L.A. Rebellion, there is a significant difference – aesthetically, politically, and financially – between Hollywood filmmaking and Black independent filmmaking. As such, my analysis considers Dash's involvement in this movement and situates *Illusions* and *Daughters* as products of this largely underappreciated era in film history, ideas I develop in more detail in Chapter 2.

Writing on *Illusions* more specifically, S.V. Hartman and Farah Jasmine Griffin (1991) show how Dash deconstructs the racial and sexual difference of the cinema through *mise-en-scène* and sound, essentially decoding the "conventions of the dominant cinematic and representational practices" (373). Similarly, in a 2004 article, Judylyn S. Ryan explores the politics of 'passing' in *Illusions*; however, she focuses primarily on the significance of Dash as a Black female filmmaker as parallel with the character of Mignon Duprée, both of whom must navigate the racism and sexism of the film industry ("Outing" 1321-2). In *Spirituality as Ideology in Black Women's Film and Literature* (2005), Ryan continues her exploration of "outing the self" through race in *Illusions*, while also drawing attention to Dash's significance in reimagining national and cinematic histories (96). Valerie Smith similarly discusses the concept of 'passing' in *Not Just Race, Not Just Gender* (1998). Here, Smith suggests that Dash takes the narrative of passing a step further than most other films that tackle this theme, arguing that Dash actually attempts to "unmask the interconnections of racial and gender ideologies" rather than allowing Duprée's racial identity to operate as a mere trope or plot point (51).

As a feature film, there is significantly more literature on *Daughters of the Dust*. Like *Illusions*, much of the work on *Daughters of the Dust* centres on the politics of race and representation, specifically with respect to clothing and the "body politic" (Gourdine 500), to language and (body) memory (Edgerton 342; Ryan, *Spirituality as Ideology* 136), and to African influences in African-American narratives (M'Baye 277; Diawara 418). As well, scholarly work has considered theories of transatlantic memory, such as in Anissa Janine Wardi's *Water and African American Memory* (2005). Wardi explores ideas of transatlantic memory, drawing attention to the ways in which Dash's filmic "cartography" showcases land and water as "primary narrative agents" (45). Here, "haunted histories" are negotiated through the symbolism of water as a bridge between the past and the future (Wardi 49). In other words, for the Peazant family, water acts not only as a bridge between island and mainland, but also as a bridge between histories of slavery, and the possible futures for Gullah culture in America (Wardi 49). This theme of 'haunted histories' is central to Dash's narrative in *Daughters of the Dust* (Mellencamp, "Haunted History" 127). As such, much of the literature on this film emphasizes the historical trajectory of the transatlantic slave trade, whereby the history of slavery "informs all situations and events in the present" (Ryan, *Spirituality as Ideology* 36).

Similarly, Patricia Mellencamp's "Haunted History: Tracey Moffat and Julie Dash" (1993) and "Making History: Julie Dash" (1994) analyze the politics of history, and more specifically, the canon of classical film history, as represented through the feminist themes in both *Illusions* and *Daughters*. More specifically, Mellencamp explores how history is represented through bodily memory (in *Daughters*), and racial representation (in *Illusions*) ("Haunted History" 128-9, 147-9). As well, Mellencamp

examines the "experimental and experiential" nature of Dash's "affective history" alongside the "*what if* 'speculative fiction'" of her films ("Making History" 76-7). While both *Illusions* and *Daughters* are examples of historical fiction, they also offer a sense of truth and validation through this fiction. It is through Dash's imaginative and affective filmmaking – through her innovative representations of race, gender, and history – that she is able to, in Mellencamp's words, "expand the contours of female subjectivity – both onscreen and in the audience – to include women of all ages and appearances, complex emotion, and collective identification" ("Haunted History" 77). It is this discussion of historical representation and historical (re)writing that is particularly important, and acts as a catalyst for my own analysis of how Dash represents race, gender, and identity through her own (re)writing of history.

Much of the literature on Dash tends to focus on *Daughters of the Dust* – which is unsurprising considering it is Dash's only feature film. And while there is work that explores *Illusions*, there is, as Mellencamp notices, "fewer than one would imagine" ("Haunted History" 83). Research that considers both films together is rarer – Mellencamp being one prominent example that examines both films (see also hooks, *Black Looks* 130). While much of the literature on *Illusions* and *Daughters* explores both of Dash's films in theoretical detail, there is little discussion of the autobiographical potential of her work. For example, while Mellencamp touches on questions of the "self" in Dash's work, suggesting that "Mignon Dupree [sic.] is a film ancestor of Julie Dash," she does not engage with the autobiographical potential of Dash's "self" being reflected in her films ("Making History" 83). In her essay "The L.A. Rebellion Plays Itself" (2015), Jacqueline Najuma Stewart highlights the significance of self-representation for this

group of filmmakers. She suggests that moments of "self-portraiture," in which directors make appearances in their own films, help represent their "authorial individuality and vulnerability, of how they are situated as insiders with a difference" (Stewart 252). It is through this self-representation that filmmakers are able to reclaim the space of the screen for themselves and their communities, drawing attention to the complexity and range of identities of those 'othered' by mainstream Eurocentric film ideologies (Stewart 252-3). Stewart draws attention to the particular significance of the "self" – both in front of and behind the camera – for Black filmmakers in particular, however her analysis focuses primarily on examples of filmmakers that make actual screen appearances. Although Dash does not appear on camera in *Illusions* or *Daughters*, I argue that there are hints of the self that seep into the frame, through her images and stories, especially when we consider Mignon's powerful words: "People make films about themselves."

While I build upon these analyses of Dash's films by drawing on the work of various theorists, particularly from avenues of Black feminist thought, I also maintain that theory exists and extends beyond scholarly literature. Following Barbara Christian's lead, as articulated in her essay "Race for Theory" (1988), I emphasize the importance of literature, poetry, myth, memoir, and more, upon our conceptual understanding of the world around us. Such venues provide a valuable lens through which we can attempt to make sense of the complexities and curiosities of our subjective and collective experiences. Indeed, as I demonstrate in the analysis chapters (Chapters 2-4), if we wish to understand the intricacies of Dash's work, it is important to consider the connections that exist not only cinematically, but personally, culturally, and historically.

A Note on Terminology

Depending on time and location – historically, politically, and geographically – there have been many different terms used to identify people of African origin. As a white Canadian writing about the experiences and issues of people of colour, it becomes particularly crucial for me to think critically about matters of terminology. I consider closely what Carole Boyce Davies (1994) has written on the "ideologies of terminologies":

> The terms that we use to name ourselves (Black, African, African-American, Black British, Minority, Latina/o, West Indian, Caribbean, Hispanic, People of Color, Women of Color, Afro-Caribbean, Third World and so on) carry their strings of echoes and inscriptions. Each represents an original misnaming and the simultaneous constant striving of the dispossessed for full representation. Each therefore must be used provisionally; each must be subject to new analyses, new questions and new understandings if we are to unlock some of the narrow terms of the discourses in which we are inscribed. In other words, at each arrival at a definition, we begin a new analysis, a new departure, a new interrogation of meaning, new contradictions. (Boyce Davies 5)

With this, I acknowledge that the issue of "naming" is contingent upon the time and position from which I write (Boyce Davies 8). I primarily use the term "Black" to refer to individuals of African descent, but sometimes use "African American" or "black" when quoting or referencing other individuals who make use of those particular terms. I take preference to the capitalized form of "Black" where possible, for several reasons. Firstly, I take inspiration from Alice Goffman's ideology of terminology in her book, *On the Run*

(2016). Goffman, a white researcher doing fieldwork in a predominantly Black Philadelphia neighborhood, chose to capitalize the word "Black" (265) following the logic of W.E.B. Du Bois in *The Philadelphia Negro* (2007). In a footnote to his study on race and society in Philadelphia, Du Bois writes: "I shall throughout this study use the term 'Negro,' to designate all persons of Negro descent, although the appellation is to some extent illogical. I shall, moreover, capitalize the word, because I believe that eight million Americans are entitled to a capital letter" (*Philadelphia Negro* 2n1).

Secondly, considering the importance of time and place upon the words we use, I view the term "Black" as offering a kind of terminological 'bookending' to the topic of my research. As it was popularly used during both the historical context of the L.A. Rebellion – the period in which Julie Dash emerged as a filmmaker – as well as in the contemporary context within which I am now positioned, it provides a way of linking both past and present through a critical, yet still provisional, understanding of the historical, political, and cultural uses of the term. As Boyce Davies points out, "'Black' as a descriptive adjective for people of African origin and descent, came into popular usage during the period of the Black power movements in the United States, the United Kingdom, the English-speaking Caribbean and in South Africa during the 1960s and 1970s" (5). For the most part, the term carried with it associations of power, beauty, and an acceptance of African ancestry (Boyce Davies 6). Moreover, reclamation of the term "Black" allowed for it to be "deliberately removed from its moorings in pathology and inferiority," and instead, became associated with self-defining power (Boyce Davies 6). This association is particularly evident in the Black Power movement in the United States in the 1960 and 1970s, which strived for "racial pride, self-sufficiency, and equality for

all people of Black and African descent" (Odlum). While often associated with the U.S., Boyce Davies observes that the term "Black" embraces "a vision of a (Pan-Africanist) Black World which exists in both Africa and in the diaspora" (7). This is, arguably, not as apparent in other phrasings, such as "African American." While "African American" could very well refer to African descendants not only in the United States, but in the broader "Americas," including North America, the Caribbean and South America, it has become somewhat conflated with the boundaries of the United States (Boyce Davies 9). As Boyce Davies points out, "since the term 'American' has become synonymous with United States imperialistic identity, would the 'other Americas' being colonized (both internally and externally) by the United States of America want to claim such a monolithic identification?" (Boyce Davies 9) She suspects that, generally, the answer would be no, considering the connotations of colonialism upon European "discovery" of the "Americas" and the subsequent destruction of Indigenous communities and nations (Boyce Davies 9). That being said, this is not to dismiss those who choose to use such phrasings. Important to note here is the title of Dash's 1992 book: *Daughters of the Dust: The Making of an African American Woman's Film*, which opts for this particular phrasing. As such, I will use this term occasionally in my analysis, but will limit my usage to direct references.

While I contend that it is of upmost importance for white researchers, such as myself, to allow racialized individuals the space and freedom to name themselves, I chose to make use of the term "Black" in most cases, as it is not only the term made popular during the time period that coincided with Dash's filmmaking journey, but it has also become, generally speaking, the term of choice by contemporary writers and theorists,

especially in the area of Black film studies (Davis, "Future of Black Film" 449; Field et al. 1; Nicholson 442; Ryan, *Spirituality as Ideology* 87). That being said, this brief survey is not intended to suggest that this is the most ideologically sound term, but that it is the most appropriate usage considering both my positionality as well as the historical context of the topic at hand. Again, following Boyce Davies' line of thought, this term must be used "relationally, provisionally, and based on location or position" and must allow us to continually interrogate its ideologies while opening us up to new forms of naming.

Outline of Chapters

The following analysis of Dash's *Illusions* and *Daughters of the Dust* takes an interdisciplinary approach, bringing each chapter to the crossroads of discourse in film, literature, and history. In Chapter 1, I outline the theoretical and methodological frameworks, paying particular attention to feminist theories that address autobiography, race, gender, and space/place, as well as feminist methodologies that highlight the intersectional necessity of this film analysis. Chapters 2-4 each tackle the titular quote - "People make films about themselves" – by considering various perspectives on the self: the self in history (Chapter 2); the self in story (Chapter 3); the self in space and place (Chapter 4). Chapter 2 explores film history with regard to issues of race and representation in the United States. It explores the context of the L.A. Rebellion film movement alongside Dash's own work, and the significance of the self in relation to race and gender within film history, as well as broader cultural and political histories. Chapter 3 examines Mignon's words more in depth, considering how her statement that "people make films about themselves" might have a dual meaning. First, as a commentary on

histories of exclusion of women and people of colour from literary and film authorship, and second, as a hint at the autobiographical element of *Illusions*, which acts as a foreshadowing for Dash's later film, *Daughters of the Dust*. Chapter 4, meanwhile, picks up from Chapter 3, taking a closer look at the role of the self in *Daughters*, highlighting the significance of archive, space/place, land, community and ancestral connection within Black feminist geographies and autobiographies. Finally, in the conclusion chapter, I bring these threads together with a closer look at the role of the 'Unborn Child' in *Daughters of the Dust*. I explore this character as the culmination of the fictional and autobiographical influences upon Dash's filmmaking. I then conclude that the open-ended conclusions in both *Daughters* and *Illusions* further disclose the auto/biographical nature of Dash's work, hinting at the continuation of her own cinematic narrative, and marking the beginning of new possibilities for the future of Black feminist filmmakers.

In the early stages of my research, I was intrigued by the connections between Julie Dash's fictional narratives and Dionne Brand's creative nonfiction. There were similar thematic threads that seemed to run through their respective works – themes of home, belonging, memory, desire, and diaspora. Both also offered an imaginative blending of fiction, poetry, and memoir to tell the stories of their personal, ancestral, and cultural histories. While Dash's work may not be considered autobiographical in the traditional sense of the genre, I could not help but interpret her films through the lens of Dionne Brand's alternative auto/biography – a form of self-life writing that drew not only from personal memoir, but from family history, myth, geography, poetry, and fiction. Brand even refers to Dash's cinematic portrayal of the Ibo Landing Myth, which I discuss

further in Chapter 4. She writes, “In Julie Dash’s film *Daughters of the Dust*, upon reaching the shores of the Americas the captured turn and walk back into the water, their chains weighing them down, their faith of return unflagging” (Brand, *Map to the Door* 44). Both Brand and Dash are concerned with the spiritual, cultural, and personal significance of the myths of reality, and the reality of myths. From written texts, to moving images, they present the possibility of a self not as something “singular,” or distinct from “others,” but as a continual becoming that is cultivated through connections – to history, to place, and to community.

As will also become evident throughout my analysis, these threads extend further, creating connections through layers of various voices across time and place – literary, poetic, theoretical, and even mythical (Christian, “Layered Rhythms” 498). Indeed, if the seeds of this research came to the surface in 2016, from Beyoncé’s pop culture *tour-de-force*, to my own personal research journey, what I wish to emphasize above all is the interconnectedness of stories, ideas, and theories which have been germinating for many years, working together to create the layers of our personal, collective, and imagined histories. As such, as an archaeologist digs through the land, I dig through the layers of cinema – through layers of time, stories, and identities – while bringing to light the linkages between people, their geographies, and their histories. Indeed, as the title of Julie Dash’s 1983 short film suggests, we must consider the reality of the ‘illusions’ of cinema, while also acknowledging its power as a medium for telling the untold stories of ourselves, our ancestors, and the places we call home.

Chapter 1:

Can't You Tell a Story?: A Theoretical and Methodological Overture

> Books leave gestures in the body; a certain way of moving, of turning, a certain closing of the eyes, a way of leaving, hesitations. Books leave certain sounds, a certain pacing; mostly they leave the elusive, which is all the story.
> Dionne Brand (*A Map to the Door of No Return*, 191)

"I'm having a premiere of my film. Would you like to come?" (Dash and Baker 154), Julie Dash recalls saying to her relatives in a 1992 interview with Houston A. Baker. When Dash began her filmmaking career in New York in the early 1970s – before she moved to Los Angeles – she was working primarily in the documentary tradition. As a young filmmaker, it was easier, she admits, to just grab a camera and shoot what was happening on the street, in her own neighborhood (Dash and Baker 152). And considering the heated political climate of the United States at the time, documentaries that captured the realities of a community – of a nation – were very much in demand (Dash and Baker 152). However, when it came time to debut her work, Dash found her family reluctant to venture downtown to her screenings. They would ask her, "Is it a documentary?" (Dash and Baker 154) After saying "yes," she often noticed looks of disappointment. Probing them further, they asked, "Well, can't you tell a story?" (Dash and Baker 154). Dash realized then that "the people in the community want to see a *story*" (Dash and Baker 154; emphasis in original). They wanted to see, hear, *feel* fiction. She decided then to train in narrative filmmaking. After all, she believed fiction and nonfiction films could still share the same kinds of stories, themes, and political realities; it was just a matter of representing the world through a different narrative lens.

The power of storytelling – both fictional and nonfictional, written and oral – is key to Dash's films, *Illusions* and *Daughters of the Dust*. And it is this spirit of the 'story' that informs my own theoretical and methodological approach. While I do draw from more traditional, scholarly forms of theory and methodology, I maintain that it is through alternative theoretical venues that one can truly understand the narrative intricacies of Dash's work. In addition to Dash's own experience with the political power of fiction, I am also inspired by feminist scholar Barbara Christian's essay "The Race for Theory" (1988). In this article, Christian proposes that we must reclaim literature, and other non-scholarly texts, as significant sources of theory. She argues that Eurocentric ideologies have created an "academic hegemony" that over-emphasizes theory tied to the commodification of scholarly citations imbued with "linguistic jargon" and "gross generalizations about culture," at the detriment of theory that exists in the literature and poetry of non-scholarly writers ("Race for Theory" 68-9). It becomes a "race for theory," as she calls it, between scholars in "fixing a constellation of ideas" before another more fashionable theory replaces it ("Race for Theory" 68). And so, the race accelerates, often silencing non-Western voices – or those that do not conform to Eurocentric modes of thought – along the way (Christian, "Race for Theory" 68). As a result, Christian suggests a return to the roots of our writing – to poetry, fiction, and myth. And specifically, a (re)turn to the writings of Black women. As she argues:

> For people of color have always theorized – but in forms quite different from the Western form of abstract logic. And I am inclined to say that our theorizing […] is often in narrative forms, in the stories we create, in riddles and proverbs, in the play with language, because dynamic rather than fixed ideas seem more to our

> liking. How else have we managed to survive with such spiritedness the assault on our bodies, social institutions, countries, our very humanity? (Christian, "Race for Theory" 68)

Christian claims that it is the stories of Black women writers in particular that have been underappreciated and excluded from the academic world, especially in the United States ("Race for Theory" 71). In her view, theory exists beyond institutional borders. It exists in fiction, in language, in the everyday – it exists in our stories. Therefore, we must turn our attention to these sources if we wish to understand the complexity of life beyond a white-male centric theory of the world (Christian, "Race for Theory" 75; see also Christian, "Layered Rhythms" 484). By listening to stories, we can begin to break the silences in theory. Just as Dash found that stories could be both political and fictional, so too can our theorizing draw from both scholarly texts, and the fictions and realities of literary lives (see also Nzegwu 158). As such, my current theoretical and methodological approach places an emphasis on not only scholarly texts, but also on literature, poetry, and non-traditional sources of theory. Drawing from the work of such Black women writers as Toni Morrison, Alice Walker, and Dionne Brand, as well as on the interviews and stories shared between Dash and others, I aim to put Dash's work in conversation with other Black (feminist) thinkers, writers, and artists. In doing so, this thesis shines a light on the complexities of race, gender, and history through Dash's representation of self in her two films: *Illusions* and *Daughters of the Dust*.

Theoretical Framework

In many ways, I owe my theoretical framework in large part to my reading of Dionne Brand's *A Map to the Door of No Return* (2001). Initially inspired by Brand's incomparable writing style, I am also interested in how she takes a complex, creative, auto/biographical approach to theorizing Black feminist geographies. Through personal reflection and cultural analysis, Brand challenges traditional cartographic methods of mapping the world while interrogating the repercussions of the transatlantic slave trade on contemporary experiences of identity. As she weaves her words fluidly between past and present, she challenges the narrative and chronological linearity of traditional autobiographical narratives and confronts our understanding of such concepts as home, place, history, memory, and belonging. With regard to the complex notion of the 'Door of No Return,' Brand writes:

> The door is a place, real, imaginary and imagined. As islands and dark continents are. It is a place which exists or existed. The door out of which Africans were captured, loaded onto ships heading for the New World. It was the door of a million exits multiplied. It is a door many of us wish never existed. It is a door which makes the word *door* impossible and dangerous, cunning and disagreeable. (Brand, *Map to the Door* 19)

Through its intricate complexity and unconventionality, Brand's book encapsulates the range of theoretical perspectives I strive for in my own research: auto/biography, postcolonialism, Black feminism, and Black feminist geography.

Shortly after reading *A Map to the Door of No Return* I came across the work of Julie Dash. Perhaps it was the temporal proximity of my theoretical encounters with both

Brand and Dash, but I could not help but notice similarities between their equally singular approaches to Black feminist narratives. As such, the theoretical framework for my current research draws inspiration from the alternative auto/biographical, postcolonial, and Black feminist geographies of Brand's writing as a way to flesh out the philosophical and epistemological complexities of Dash's own filmmaking.

Life Writing and Auto/Biography

When Julie Dash set out to make *Daughters of the Dust*, she was initially inspired by the stories of her own family (Dash, "Making *Daughters*" 5). However, she found that her relatives were reluctant to talk about their history in South Carolina, and their migration north, as these experiences brought about troubling memories of the past (Dash, "Making *Daughters*" 5). Reflecting on this, Dash says:

> When things got too personal, too close to memories they didn't want to reveal, they would close up, push me away, tell me to go ask someone else. I knew then that the images I wanted to show, the story I wanted to tell, had to touch an audience the way it touched my family. It had to take them back, take them inside their family memories, inside our collective memories. (Dash, "Making *Daughters*" 5)

The resistance of Dash's family to recounting their past stirs up several questions: How do you tell stories that deal with a difficult past (Hartman 10; Philip, *Zong!* 191)? How does trauma affect the stories that we *do* tell? What happens to the autobiographical narrative when a chapter of (family) history remains closed (in the case of *Daughters*)? Or what about when particular voices, like those of Black Americans, are silenced by a

more patriarchal or colonial 'History' (in the case Hollywood in Dash's *Illusions*)? This is why alternative approaches to history and life writing are particularly interesting to look to for expanding our notions of what, indeed, constitutes autobiography, who gets to tell their story, and how histories are told. What stories are being told between the lines, and what histories are unfolding beyond the margins?

To interpret film as a form of auto/biography, one must first understand the foundations of autobiographical theory. Attempts to define the genre of autobiography are contested to this day, however, understanding the debates and theoretical gaps opens up the possibilities of placing film within an autobiographical paradigm. Philippe Lejeune's *On Autobiography* (1989) is an important work of autobiographical theory. Perhaps most influential is his theory of the 'autobiographical pact', which refers to the presumed agreement between reader and writer that the identity of the narrator equals that of the protagonist (Lejeune 22). In other words, the "I" in the text, is the same as the "I" of the author. Furthermore, Lejeune develops a "referential pact," parallel to his concept of the autobiographical pact, which refers to the relationship between an autobiographical text and reality (22). He elaborates that the aim of autobiography is not "'the effect of the real', but the image of the real" (22).

While Lejeune's autobiographical criteria are relatively simple, they are also fairly limiting. For example, Dash had difficulty accessing her family's history, forcing her to draw instead on archival documents as well as her own imagination. The narrative she crafted, however, was nevertheless a reflection of her family and her Gullah heritage. More traditional conceptions of autobiography, which assume the singularity of the

author-protagonist pact, ignore the significance of family and community, of history and the imagination – of the self as connected to others, to the past, and to fiction (see Chapters 3 and 4). As such, more recent debates in life writing have attempted to expand and elaborate upon the epistemological boundaries of autobiography as a genre. Dash's films demonstrate hints of autobiographical practice, yet do not proclaim an autobiographical pact. That is, there are hints of a cinematic self even if she is not present on the screen (see Chapter 3). As such, my current inquiry acknowledges the significance of Lejeune's foundational theory while more actively drawing from literature more specific to women's life writing, particularly from Black women writers of the 1970s and 1980s – the period in which Dash was emerging as a filmmaker.

Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson have written extensively on autobiographical theory, and more specifically on women's life narratives. They engage with, and challenge, Lejeune's theoretical approach, as they attempt to situate 'autobiography' on the intersections of gender, race, and class. Similar to Lejeune's autobiographical pact, Smith and Watson (2010) maintain that, "autobiographical truth resides in the intersubjective exchange between narrator and reader aimed at producing a shared understanding of the meaning of a life" (16-17). They argue that if we emphasize the "dialogic exchange between writer and reader/viewer" then our understanding of autobiography, and life narrative more generally, can focus more on the "processes of communicative exchange and understanding" rather than on verifying authenticity (*Reading Autobiography* 16-17).

Extending this concept of dialogic exchange beyond written texts, we may also apply it to the study of film. In this visual medium, there is an essential, tripartite

relationship between the filmmaker, the viewer, and the screen image. Therefore, considering autobiography as an intersubjective exchange – or as a process – is helpful when examining the autobiographical dimension of filmmaking. For example, Dash's work was often the target of critiques of authenticity – for its representation of history and Gullah heritage (Dash and hooks 31). However, much of this dialogue on 'authenticity' relies on Eurocentric models of 'fact' and 'truth,' ignoring the spiritual and mythical dimensions of this work – features of African histories that do not necessarily conform to mainstream attitudes towards the autobiographical genre. This also relates to the tradition of Black women's writing, in that the value of community and connection are central to understanding and representing the self (Braxton 6; Morrison, "Rootedness" 57; Stover 20-22; C. Tate 55). The concept of a singular author, or protagonist, is thus not always sufficient when we open up the autobiographical beyond Eurocentric categorical boundaries (ideas that I discuss further in Chapter 4). Furthermore, considering the collaborative nature of filmmaking, opening up analyses beyond a singular "I" can help us understand more fully the intersubjective process between self, other, and narrative.

Like Smith and Watson, Jeanne Perreault and Marlene Kadar (2005) challenge the classic approach of autobiographical theory as they attempt to address the changes and development to autobiography as genre. While Lejeune's perception of autobiography is relatively fixed, Perreault and Kadar acknowledge the diverse reality of the autobiographical – autobiographical works that extend the genre beyond linear, narrative (published) texts that chronicle a singular author-protagonist's 'self' – offering the term "auto/biography" to connote flexibility of genre and complexity of the 'self'/'other' dialectic (3). For Perrault and Kadar, exploring autobiography offers a way into "new

ways of knowing" (2). They engage with "unlikely documents," including deportation lists, art exhibits, internet websites, memories, and more, in an effort to extend and broaden what we might consider auto/biography (2). Doing so opens up more possibilities for learning – about ourselves, about others, and about the communities in which we live together. This use of 'auto/biography' as recognition of an autobiographical genre that is flexible and in flux is particularly important in my positioning of Dash's films within the autobiographical context. For example, memory and myth – including those carried on through oral traditions – play an important part in Dash's cinematic narratives, connecting her stories to African and Gullah histories. These kinds of histories did not always have the privilege of publication, but instead were carried on through memories, bodies, and stories. As such, it becomes crucial as contemporary researchers to acknowledge the richness of these histories, and to consider their autobiographical value as a step towards understanding more about ourselves and others – through the past, present, and for the future.

Postcolonialism and Black Feminism

Alongside theories of autobiography and life writing, I also draw from feminist scholarship on postcolonialism and race to analyze the films of Julie Dash. Trinh T. Minh-ha's *Woman, Native, Other* (1989) has been particularly influential to my postcolonial feminist approach. In this text, Minh-ha challenges the predominantly masculine dimensions of writing and theory, questioning uses of language and writing in relation to the idea of marginalized, or 'Other,' voices. Drawing from her own experiences, Minh-ha describes the particular "triple bind" of being a woman writer of

colour (*Woman, Native, Other* 6). Never *just* a woman, and never *just* a writer, she sits precariously on the cusp of colonial and patriarchal categorization (Minh-ha, *Woman, Native, Other* 6). This Eurocentric, "male-is-norm ideology" forces her to rethink her relationship to language, which she realizes is inextricably related to oppressive forms of power (Minh-ha, *Woman, Native, Other* 6; see also Philip, *She Tries Her Tongue* 56-9). She suggests that to combat the confines of linguistic hierarchy and hegemony, "Women must write through their bodies" (Minh-ha, *Woman, Native, Other* 36). Echoing Hélène Cixous's (1976) assertion that the body "must be heard" (880), Minh-ha believes, "In writing themselves, women have attempted to render noisy and audible all that had been silenced in phallocentric discourse" (*Woman, Native, Other* 3). Writing is thus a way of bringing the self into existence. It becomes a bodily experience – a story of self.

And still, writing becomes a story of others. All writing reflects on other writings, and thus, other selves (Minh-ha, *Woman, Native, Other* 23). Minh-ha writes, "I write to show myself showing people who show me my own showing […] In this unwonted spectacle made of reality and fiction, where redoubled images form and reform, neither I nor you come first" (*Woman, Native, Other* 22). In other words, even the experience and expression of the 'I' relies on a connection with a 'You.' Here, Minh-ha blends theories of postcolonialism and autobiography by challenging Eurocentric limitations of language and conceptions of the self. She argues instead for a life writing framework that acknowledges the fluidity and multilayered reality of women's writing by expanding our perception of identity beyond the borders defined by colonial and patriarchal histories (see also Goeman 145). As Dash's films emphasize the significance of relationships between Black women for our understanding of self and other – through dialogue,

through space, and through the recognition and validation of each other. As discussed earlier, the self in Dash's work is not understood here as a singular writing individual, but as connected to others – across time, seas, and borders. Minh-ha's innovative exploration of feminism and postcoloniality is essential to the theoretical framework that allows me to critically analyze representations of space, place, gender, and identity in Julie Dash's films.

Bringing race to the forefront of postcolonial perspectives is Audre Lorde's *Sister Outsider* (1984) in which she famously claims: "The master's tools will never dismantle the master's house" (112). As Lorde explains:

> Those of us who stand outside the circle of this society's definition of acceptable women [...] know that *survival is not an academic skill* [...] It is learning how to take our differences and make them strengths. *For the master's tools will never dismantle the master's house*. They may allow us to temporarily beat him at his own game, but they will never enable us to bring about genuine change. And this fact is only threatening to those women who still define the master's house as their only source of support. (Lorde, *Sister Outsider* 112; emphasis in original)

This is particularly significant to consider when exploring the wave of New Black Cinema, a Black independent film movement of which Julie Dash is considered a key figure (see Chapter 2). Often described as a resistance, or "rebellion" (fittingly dubbed the L.A. Rebellion) to the white, patriarchal structures of classic Hollywood filmmaking, this movement puts Lorde's philosophy into practice. Through sound, cinematography, and story, Dash and other members of the L.A. Rebellion challenge the traditions of mainstream cinema by rejecting the tools that uphold oppressive, white patriarchal

structures. From the late 1960s to the 1980s, they helped create a New Black Cinema that reimagined and revolutionized what was artistically, narratively, and politically possible for Black Americans. Due to this theoretical connection across disciplines and decades, I use Lorde's postcolonial, Black feminist perspective as a light with which to look deeper into the revolutionary and rebellious heart of Julie Dash's films.

Feminist Geography

Feminist geographies, and Black feminist geographies more specifically, form the basis of my final key theoretical perspective. While I am interested in representations of race and experiences of identity in *Illusions* and *Daughters of the Dust*, I maintain that space and place significantly impact race, gender, and identity. For example, there is a staunch American nationalistic backdrop to *Illusions* with its Hollywood setting, and more specifically, with the role of the fictional 'National Studios' as a leader in producing American-centered WWII dramas. *Daughters of the Dust* is also deeply entrenched in the idea of space and place through the Sea Island setting, which is expressed vividly through the central conflict between the Peazant family and their imminent migration north. As such, not only am I interested in representations of race, gender, and identity in these films, but also how they are inextricably linked to notions of space and place.

Due to the specific elements of race and identity at play in Julie Dash's films, I also draw from Dionne Brand's *A Map to the Door of No Return* (2001), as discussed earlier in this chapter, as well as from Katherine McKittrick's *Demonic Grounds* (2006), a book which explores Black women's geographies more specifically. Not unlike my own theoretical framework, McKittrick takes inspiration from Brand, approaching geography

as space, place, and location in both "physical materiality and imaginative configurations" (*Demonic Grounds* 11; see also Wynter 638-9). For McKittrick, geography is not fixed. Rather, it is fluid (Massey 12-13; McDowell 31-32). Space exists not only tangibly, but socially as well. She suggests that the relationship between power and domination, and Black women's geographies, is in the social production of space (*Demonic Grounds* xi; see also McKittrick, "On Plantations" 948). Importantly, McKittrick brings out the bodily aspect of geography by highlighting the particular significance of the body upon conceptions of race, gender, and space (*Demonic Grounds* 44). For example, she works to re-center the subjective in discourse surrounding slavery, highlighting in particular the bodily experience of slave ships and auction blocks – a topic that is often explored in more economic or legal terms (see also Philip *Zong!* 191-94). Considering the history of the transatlantic slave trade, bodies became territorialized – claimed and owned by others who were deemed 'racially superior' (McKittrick, *Demonic Grounds* 44). In her critical analyses, McKittrick brings histories of race, gender, class, and sexuality in conversation with the literature of other Black women writers, including Marlene NourbeSe Philip, Dionne Brand, and Toni Morrison. In so doing, she is able to hone a Black feminist geography that considers the influence of history, literature, poetry, and the imagination upon social constructions of space, race, gender, and the body. Much like Dash in her filmmaking, McKittrick explores the experiential crossroads of Black female subjectivity while also focusing on narratives that highlight Black histories and subjects in an effort to make visible those social lives which have so often been rendered invisible and/or displaced (*Demonic Grounds* 11).

Although I will be exploring ideas of race, gender, space, place, and identity through Julie Dash's films, these critical works of feminist and Black geographies help lay the foundation for understanding spatial identities and social relations before adding another layer of filmic representation. In a way, like feminist geographies in general, I view Dash's body of work as waters uncharted: fluid, in flux, and resistant to traditional boundaries. As a result, I do not expect to be able to map her work in entirety, but to open up her work to more diverse modes and methods of inquiry.

Methodological Approaches

> Methodologies are not the alpha and the omega, but they can serve as a valuable tool in the quest for understanding.
> Bill Nichols (*Movies and Methods* 2)
>
> The journey is the destination.
> Dionne Brand (*A Map to the Door of No Return* 203)

In the introduction to his anthology, *Movies and Methods* (1976), film scholar Bill Nichols claims, "there can be a madness in methods" (1). I find this statement to be both amusing and refreshingly humble, and take it as the starting point for my methodological approach. Nichols clarifies his statement, saying:

> Methodologies cannot be allowed to become ends. They are means, tools to help construct models of how things work. In the hands of the crude or dogmatic, a methodology can be worse than nothing. It can become rationale for banality, a justification for self-righteousness. But when used with care, methodologies can be of great value. A method can help shape thoughts into more than that kind of

> bourgeois subjectivism where the sheer intelligence of the writer becomes the only criterion of value. (B. Nichols 1)

Nichols argues that methodology should not be the target, but "a tool to aid the writer, and reader, in understanding the world" (1). These tools acts as mediators between the writer and the subject; it is a way of bridging the conceptual gaps between art and audience, and an attempt to organize our unique understandings of such phenomena (B. Nichols 1). Nichols' argument is in line with many other qualitative, and especially, feminist researchers. For example, Laurel Richardson and Elizabeth Adams St. Pierre (2005) consider "writing as a method of inquiry" (970). Writing is not a means to an end, but a means to discovery, a *process* that can be as insightful (or more insightful, perhaps) as the final draft itself. Similarly, in *Beyond Writing Culture* (2010), Olaf Zenker and Karsten Kumoll approach writing as a research method in itself. Although focusing more on ethnographic research, Zenker and Kumoll's work is still important for understanding the ethical implications of representation, a point which I take up later in this chapter.

Feminist Film Analysis

Like Bill Nichols, I take a more alternative approach to methods of film analysis. Nichols rejects the tendency to glorify "a dozen or so lofty mountain peaks in film theory and criticism," and uses his anthology as a "protest against the temptation to see the past as a thing apart, shaped and defined by the Great Men whose achievement we must perpetually honor" (2). Similarly, I make use of methods that defy the heteropatriarchal tendencies of classic film criticism. In other words, I find more inspiration from intersectional feminist methods that put issues of race, gender and class at the forefront of

inquiry. That being said, film analysis arguably faces the issues of the "master's tools" identified by Lorde (*Sister Outsider*, 112). As Nichols admits, "Building upon the past [of film theory and criticism], however, presupposes knowing something about it" (2). For example, Bateman and Schmidt (2012) explore film analysis through discussions of semiotics, and more specifically, the ways in which the viewer makes meaning out of film. Here, the relationship between theory and practice is critical, as the responsibility of the viewer to the image relies on a certain level of engagement with, and understanding of, film form and theory. Therefore, while I do take an intersectional approach to film analysis, it is difficult to do so without engaging with the classic texts that form the foundation of that discipline, even if it is to critique or refashion them.

While theory and methods are arguably inseparable, particularly when it comes to film criticism, my primary methodological aim is to pursue a feminist, contextual analysis of each film. Generally speaking, contextual criticism aims to analyze relevant aspects of film within the larger social context (B. Nichols 5). Unlike formal criticism, a popular form of film analysis which is concerned primarily with the content of the film in isolation, such as with the stylistic qualities of auteurism or the visual components of *mise-en-scène*, contextual criticism is concerned with relating aspects of style and content to the larger totality in which a film is produced (B. Nichols 5). Feminist film criticism is a sub-category of contextual criticism that is concerned with the representation of women in film, as well as how this is related to the roles of women in contemporary society (B. Nichols 177; see also Mulvey 6-7; Doane 44-55). As a form of contextual criticism, feminist criticism places an emphasis more on the social and material conditions in which a film is produced, rather than the formal questions of cinematic artistry (B. Nichols 177).

According to Patricia Erens (1990), many feminist film critics aim to investigate "the differences between women, especially how race and sexual preference, along with ethnicity and class, establish social priorities" (xxiii). Going beyond the filmic content, feminist film analysis also draws attention to the connections between "filmmaking-exhibition-criticism-distribution-audience," raising a consciousness of power relations within film spectatorship, and subsequently representation in film criticism (Rich 268-9). Generally speaking, a feminist film criticism aims to take an intersectional approach to methods of film analysis, whereby the differences between women, specifically in terms of race, sexuality, ethnicity, and class, are put into focus (Erens xxiii). Through this intersectional approach, feminist criticism aims to challenge the white male-dominated canon within film studies, both in terms of film scholars and filmmakers (Erens xvi).

Similarly, in "White Privilege and Looking Relations: Race and Gender in Feminist Film Theory," Jane Gaines (1986) attempts to bring this notion of intersectionality to the heart of feminist film theory and criticism. She argues that much of film criticism has become so focused on the mechanics of film form that it has forgotten the importance of sociological and historical context (60). Gaines also argues that the dominance of psychoanalysis in film theory has perpetuated the masculine/feminine divide by focusing on sexual differences and ignoring issues of race and class ("White Privilege" 61). As such, feminist film criticism aims to engage with cross-cultural perspectives and to address the similarities and differences of women's experiences of race, ethnicity, work, social class, familial and sexual relations as represented through a range of films (Erens xxiii). Going beyond the filmic content, it also draws attention to the relationship between film, filmmaker and viewer, raising a

consciousness of power relations within film spectatorship, and subsequently of representation in film criticism.

As such, while approaching my research through an intersectional, feminist lens, I am also actively conscious of my positioning as a white woman through this tripartite relationship between film, filmmaker, and viewer. Similar to Gaines' argument, bell hooks' *Black Looks: Race and Representation* (1992) provides a thorough, critical analysis of issues of race and racism in the media, and more specifically, in film. The essays in this book challenge how Black narratives have been portrayed over the years, offering new ways to see, and think about, representations of race (hooks, *Black Looks* 5). hooks' analysis not only interrogates the images in the media, she also looks to the people that produce it, as well as the audiences that consume it. Considering the significance of audience reception to films, I, as researcher and viewer, aim to make my voice present in my writing through elements of self-reflexivity. However, considering my primary interest is to explore the theoretical and artistic depths of Julie Dash's films, I do not wish to oversaturate my writing with references to myself. As a white researcher who is analyzing issues of race and representation, I would not want to let my voice overshadow the voice of Dash, or the characters in her film, who do so well to highlight the significance of representing Black female subjectivities in the media. I believe it would be an error to feature myself too much in my writing, while it would be equally amiss to not acknowledge my own positionality as researcher. Thus, I aim to strike a balance between these two modes of representation.

On a more logistical note, considering the emphasis on social and historical context within feminist film criticism, I will briefly outline the materials and primary

sources that I use beyond the films themselves. The UCLA Film and Television Archive has made tremendous efforts over the last several years towards the preservation and education of Black independent cinema, specifically with respect to the L.A. Rebellion. Many films associated with this movement are made available online, through the archives own YouTube channel, while books and DVD collections are also available through the website (*UCLA Film and Television Archive*). In addition to this, there are many interviews with Julie Dash – from her early days as a young filmmaker in the 1980s, to more recent years that take a more retrospective look at her work – available through such sites as *The Guardian* (Bradshaw; Clark; Wallace) and Indiana University Bloomington (Spilker), as well as through various film festivals and panels available on YouTube (UCLAFilmTVArchive).

Dash has also written extensively about her experiences as a filmmaker, particularly with regards to *Daughters of the Dust* (Dash, "Making *Daughters*" 1-26). As such, I look to first person accounts from Dash herself through interviews, her own writing, as well as to her active Twitter and blog pages. Exploring these types of documents will help situate my analysis within the wider social and historical context in which these films were produced and received by audiences. While I do aim to analyze film as a narrative art form, I contend that it is especially important to consider film as a cultural product. Using various sources, both popular and academic, I am able to analyze the significance of both content and context in Dash's films. In a way, this thesis takes twists and turns across academic waters, building bridges between theoretical perspectives and finding comfort in the interdisciplinary, where the writing is the journey, and the journey becomes the destination.

Chapter 2:

Rebels with a Cause: Race, Representation, and (Re)Writing History in Film

> I always knew I wanted to make films about African American women. To tell stories that had not been told. To show images of our lives that had not been seen.
> Julie Dash ("Making *Daughters of the Dust*" 4)

Scene 1: Queensbridge Housing Projects, Long Island City, New York, c. 1960s.

Julie Dash, a young girl growing up in the projects in Queens, spends her time reading, writing, and daydreaming. Her daydreams offer a chance to explore the possibilities of fiction and fantasy – to imagine new worlds, new places, new people. They are also a chance to escape the dull, patronizing conversations of the adults around her – adults who do not always appreciate her vivid imagination (G. Tate, "Favorite Daughters" 31). Both a desire to dream, and a yearning to rebel, these illusions play in her mind like a perpetual motion picture. Would these fictions, someday, become reality?

After watching popular Hollywood movies, including West Side Story (1961) and Goldfinger (1964), Dash has the idea to transform her imagination into real life. She and her friends memorize lines from these Hollywood stories, reenacting them around their neighborhood. Kids fill up the basketball courts to play their part in the Jets vs. Sharks battle, while Bond-inspired dialogue finds its way into cheeky conversations at school (G. Tate, "Favorite Daughters" 31-2). From screen to street, Hollywood and the 'hood'

merge, blending fiction and reality through the creative bodies and minds of New York's youth.[2]

Growing up in Long Island City, New York during the 1950s and 1960s, Julie Dash did not dream of becoming a filmmaker. Living in the Queensbridge Housing Projects, or the 'hood' as she calls it, she could not imagine that she would, or even *could*, become a filmmaker, let alone becoming one of the most influential members of the Black independent film movement. Reflecting on her childhood, she admits that her dreams were shaped by the "limitations imposed by [her] environment" (Dash, "Making *Daughters*" 1). In her book, *Daughters of the Dust: The Making of an African American Woman's Film* (1992), she writes, "My ambition, like those of most children growing up in African American neighborhoods, in projects, in inner cities, were stifled by what I thought possible for me as a black child" ("Making *Daughters*" 2). She then adds, "My dreams were also molded by the cinema and television stories, where the likes of me didn't even exist" ("Making *Daughters*" 2). For Dash, the images she saw on the screen, both big and small, did not reflect the reality of her own experiences as a young Black woman. Rather, gazing at the silver screen was like looking into a crystal ball that could only conjure a faulty fraction of the future – a future that could not recognize the complexities of being Black in the United States, and could not predict the possibilities of what one could become. How could she *become* a filmmaker when Black women were

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[2] The inspiration for this descriptive scene comes from Toni Cade Bambara's preface to Julie Dash's *Daughters of the Dust: The Making of an African American Woman's Film* (1992). Here, Bambara offers three different "takes," or scenes, that relate to the Ibo Landing Myth portrayed in Dash's film (xi-xii). Together, these scenes – one from Bambara's life, one from literature, and one from cinema – demonstrate the historical and cultural threads that weave across autobiography, fiction, and myth.

rarely pictured on the screen, let alone being the ones to *direct* what could, in fact, be seen? (Dash, "Making *Daughters*" 1; Redding and Brownworth 194) Reflecting on her childhood experience of reenacting Hollywood films on the streets of Queens, she says, "I want scenes like those in my films – the kind you never see in Hollywood movies about black urban youth" (qtd. in G. Tate, "Favorite Daughters" 32).

When Dash was seventeen years old, she attended a cinematography workshop at the Studio Museum in Harlem. Interestingly, the equipment for this workshop was donated after the 1960s riots as a way to "quell the rage of Harlem youth," which, as this chapter will later explore, demonstrates both the cathartic and political power of the movie camera (G. Tate, "Favorite Daughters" 31; Redding and Brownworth 195). Although Dash initially thought it a mere casual outing with a friend, this workshop helped her realize her passion for filmmaking, marking the beginning of her career in cinema. According to Dash, it was this experience at the Studio Museum working alongside other young Black Americans that helped her discover, "the power of making and redefining our images on the screen" (Dash, "Making *Daughters*" 2). If the images presented on television and movie screens molded Dash's dreams as a young girl, then by becoming a filmmaker, she would finally be able to reimagine, rewrite, and re-present screen images to better reflect the histories, the hopes, and the experiences of Black women in the United States.

Dash's uneasy relationship with cinema, and media more broadly, was unfortunately not particularly unique. Indeed, she admits that "most children growing up in African American neighborhoods" shared sentiments similar to her own thwarted ambitions (Dash, "Making *Daughters*" 2). However, while recognizing the oppressive

power of under- and misrepresentation on the screen, she also believed in the possibilities of transformation through cinema. Finding herself behind a camera in Harlem helped her realize that the images she had seen as a child were not the only images possible. As an artist and storyteller – as a filmmaker, that is – she realized her own potential and ability to challenge and change the images and stories being presented to marginalized audiences across the country. Moreover, she had the power to pursue a future beyond what she originally thought possible as a young Black woman.

Film scholar and cultural historian Clyde Taylor (1983) suggests, "The best approach to black cinema as art is to see it in intimate relation to the full range of Afro-American art expression." Indeed, Julie Dash's rise as a filmmaker was rooted not only in the harsh realities of (under)representation she witnessed as a young girl – and the drive to right (and rewrite) these wrongs – but also in the wider historical, political, and cultural climate in which she grew as an artist.

As such, in this chapter, I begin with an overview of the Black independent film movement of the 1970s and 1980s, known as the L.A. Rebellion, outlining the cultural climate in which Dash began to cultivate her own cinematic style of storytelling. Next, I draw attention to Black feminist thought and theory in order to further explore the praxis of the L.A. Rebellion, allowing for a deeper analysis of Dash's own films as an important contribution to the movement. Finally, my exploration of history, home, and belonging through the lens of Black women writers and thinkers – including Julie Dash – allows me to challenge the very nature of dominant and canonical histories in the U.S., making way for more inclusive, and positive futures, where the images on our screens are not held up by white ideological structures.

The Birth of a New Black Cinema

Representations of Black women in mainstream cinema have long relied on damaging and one-dimensional images rooted in white patriarchal beliefs, myths, and stereotypes (Gibson-Hudson 25; hooks, *Black Looks* 116-8; Redding and Brownworth 193). Poet and theorist Audre Lorde (1984) claims, "in order to survive, those of us for whom oppression is as [A]merican as apple pie have always had to be watchers" (114; see also Taylor, "Black Silence" 3; Hill Collins 97). Under the guise of an American ideology that presumes a white heteropatriarchal status quo, racism and sexism become as innocent – and quintessentially American – as apple pie. Objectified as the Other to this falsified mainstream, Black women thus become witnesses to their own (mis)representations (Hill Collins 97, 99; Lorde, *Sister Outsider* 112). They are relegated to being 'watchers' rather than 'creators.' Similarly, Stuart Hall (1989) argues that "dominant regimes of representation" – which include Hollywood – have "the power to make us see and experience ourselves as 'Other'" (71). And while mainstream cinema has long held this power of representation, film is not merely a mirror held up to society (Hall 80). Rather, it is a tool, a form of representation, that has the power to create new images and subjects (Hall 80). Identity is not merely reflected, rather it is created *through* cinema. As Hall suggests, it is by resisting the silences propagated by cinematic regimes of power, and by (re)claiming the right to (self-)representation, that Black individuals can recover and redefine their own histories and cultural identities (80-81). It has thus become the goal of Black women filmmakers – who have long-been the 'watchers' of their own misrepresentations – to challenge these damaging, dominant representations by creating narratives that demonstrate the complexity, continuity, and fluidity of Black womanhood

(Gibson-Hudson 25-6). As this chapter will demonstrate, these filmmakers worked to (re)claim the tools of representation through, what Clyde Taylor (2015) describes as, "vindication through visibility" (xviii).

In her influential essay, "The Oppositional Gaze: Black Female Spectators" (1992), Black feminist theorist bell hooks examines how issues of race and representation reverberate across generations, highlighting the power of resistance through "'looking' relations," and what she calls the oppositional gaze of Black spectators (*Black Looks*, 116). According to hooks, when film and television first became available to Black individuals in the United States, they approached these images with a critical eye and an awareness of the white ideologies behind them (hooks, *Black Looks* 117). Being a spectator meant not passively consuming media, but critically engaging with the images being presented. This agency through spectatorship signifies what hooks calls the "oppositional black gaze" (*Black Looks* 117). She argues, "To stare at the television, or mainstream movies, to engage its images was to engage its negation of black representation" (hooks, *Black Looks* 117). Adding, "It was the oppositional black gaze that responded to these looking relations by developing an independent black cinema" (hooks, *Black Looks* 117). It was this absence of authentic representations of Black experiences in mainstream media that sparked resistance, fueling a cultural revolution over the powers of self-representation.

Similar to hooks, Gloria J. Gibson (2016) suggests that Black women in particular have always recognized the power of cinema (195). She writes, "During the early decades of the twentieth century, they envisioned themselves in front of and behind the camera and were cognizant of the camera's potential to capture African-American talent as well

as to document day-to-day experiences" (195). However, she adds that Black women were wary of these artistic longings, as they were fully aware of film technology's unaffordability (195). While financial constraints were a very real barrier facing many aspiring Black filmmakers, the desire and vision for a filmic future that reflected the experiences of Black Americans could not be extinguished (Davis, "Future of Black Film" 450). Black audiences interrogated the screen through an oppositional gaze, and Black independent filmmakers stepped into the frame by confronting and transforming what it was that *could* be seen. One particular group of these daring and determined filmmakers, who helped reimagine and rewrite the "cinematic landscape" for Black Americans from the 1960s to the 1980s, would later come to be known as the L.A. Rebellion ("Story of the L.A. Rebellion"; see also Field et al. 1-2). Relegated to the sidelines for far too long, the 'watchers' would now become the creators.

Following the civil unrest of the late 1960s, marked by the Watts Uprising of 1965, as well as the ongoing Civil Rights Movement and Vietnam War, a group of young African and African American students entered the UCLA School of Film, Television, and Theatre as part of an "Ethno-Communications initiative" launched to address the concerns of communities of colour ("Story of the L.A. Rebellion"; Field et al. 10-14; Taylor "New U.S. Black Cinema"). From the late 1960s to the 1980s, these young film students openly challenged and rejected the traditions of mainstream cinema in the U.S. because they believed it did not allow for the artistic expression and political realities of Black life (Davis, "Keeping the Black" 158; Reid 10). Due to this decidedly anti-Hollywood approach to filmmaking, and the historical climate of the Civil Rights era,

Clyde Taylor would later dub this revolutionary group of young visionaries the "L.A. Rebellion" (Taylor, "Preface" xix-xx, 348).

Although the term "L.A. Rebellion" was coined by Clyde Taylor in the mid 1980s, the group's name has gone through several reincarnations over the years (Field et al. 2). For example, as Allyson Field and others (2015) point out, Toni Cade Bambara refers to them as "the Black insurgents at UCLA," Michael T. Martin prefers the "L.A. Collective," Ntongela Masilela uses the "Los Angeles School of Black Filmmakers," while more generally, the "Black independent film movement" may be considered an umbrella term over all of these variations (Field et al. 2; Bambara xiv; Martin, "Struggles for the *Sign*" 198). Although it is not embraced by all scholars, or even all members of this filmmaking group, the L.A. Rebellion is arguably the most common term used to describe this radical artistic movement (Field et al. 2).

Some of these filmmakers, including Haile Gerima, feel that the term "L.A. Rebellion" prioritizes Black members of the group, while excluding the role of Chicano, Asian, Iranian, and even "gutsy," "left wing" white members of the movement ("L.A. Rebellion Oral Histories" 349). Others, however, believe the term helps differentiate from other race film designations in the U.S., particularly "Blaxploitation" films, a genre that refers to the 1970s wave of Black-themed films noted for their exaggerated portrayal of violence and sexuality (Horak 120). In a conversation about the origins of the term, "L.A. Rebellion," Julie Dash says:

> We were rebelling against being told this is how we were going to be seen in films and this is how the films were going to define us. We were going to redefine ourselves and we were going to have our own voices. So, yes, we were very much

> in the midst of rebelling against Hollywood and working in the so-called belly of the beast, because this is where these images came out and that defined the whole world and controlled the world and the whole manifest destiny. So yes, we were rebelling against that. ("L.A. Rebellion Oral Histories" 350)

Dash is speaking here to the spirit of resistance against not only Hollywood, but against the racism inherent in the industry. For example, although the L.A. Rebellion drew some aesthetic inspiration from Blaxploitation, namely its use of Black American spaces and symbols, the group was actively working against the genre's mainstream propagation of sexist and racist stereotypes, or what Ed Guerrero describes as "caricatures masquerading as progress on the issue of black filmic representation" (Guerrero qtd. in Horak 120; "L.A. Rebellion Oral Histories" 350). These new Black independent filmmakers were interested in creating "a new cinematic language," one that did not cater to Hollywood's expectations of the Black aesthetic (Davis, "Future of Black Film" 450). The L.A. Rebellion rebelled against the racial stereotypes and "ethnic superstitions" propagated by mainstream cinema in an effort to uphold the dignity and humanity of Black Americans (Taylor, "Preface" xx-xxi). It was not about "breaking into Hollywood," as Bernard Nicolas asserts, it was about breaking *away* from Hollywood ("L.A. Rebellion Oral Histories" 351).

Importantly, Allyson Nadia Field, Jan-Christopher Horak, and Jacqueline Najuma Stewart, who edited the first book devoted to this revolutionary group, embrace Taylor's term in their title: *L.A. Rebellion: Creating a New Black Cinema* (2015). They write:

> We use 'L.A. Rebellion' not as a simple descriptor but as a problematic that points to many complex factors shaping Black filmmaking and historiography: tensions

> between individual and collective goals and actions; between claiming a defiant racial specificity and acknowledging the many influences that inform the creation of 'Black cinema.' (Field et al. 2)

The term L.A. Rebellion is thus not meant to categorize strictly, or oversimplify this group of filmmakers, but to indicate its role as a *movement* – one that is fluid and tangled with the many historical and political threads that reach beyond the borders of UCLA. And still, filmmaker Zeinabu irene Davis points out that while a consistent phrase can be helpful when discussing the history of the group, the reality is that they did not call themselves the "L.A. Rebellion" in the midst of the movement ("L.A. Rebellion Oral Histories" 351). What is important, however, is that the spirit of the rebellion exists *through* their work, which carries on to this day ("L.A. Rebellion Oral Histories" 350-1).

The use of "rebellion" brings up images of resistance and violence, perhaps even - to Clyde Taylor's own dismay - militia ("L.A. Rebellion Oral Histories" 348-9). However, it is important to acknowledge the relationship between the Watts Riots, also known as the Watts Rebellion, and Taylor's epithet, the L.A. Rebellion. In 1965, between August 11 and 16, the Watts neighborhood of California experienced five days of violence and destruction that would alter the political and social climate not only of Los Angeles, but the whole nation, for years to come. While this widespread rioting carried on for five days, many maintain that it was the result of countless years of racial discrimination and segregation, particularly from police and housing policies – issues which can be traced further back through the nation's long, turbulent history of race relations, from the Great Migration, to the Civil War, and to the slave trade (Field et al. 6). It was this period of social unrest that brought Elyseo Taylor to Los Angeles to do

community work with the young people of Watts, eventually leading him to UCLA where he became the film school's only Black instructor (Field et al. 6). On his work to cultivate Black arts in the aftermath of the Watts Rebellion, Elyseo Taylor suggested that the arts, including film, was a means of dialogue – between the self, the students, and the community at large (Field et al. 6). He says:

> Up until then, and especially with regards to motion picture and television, the minority groups had been ease-dropping [sic] in on the dialogue of the white community. […] In making their own films, the people would […] be able to become acquainted with themselves as a community. They could look into all of its parts, learn the needs, discover the dreams, search for solutions to common problems. (qtd. in Field et al. 6-7)

Instead of remaining "fantasy-beings for-others," filmmaking provided these young Black students with the skills and tools to finally become "beings-for-themselves" (Taylor, "Preface" xxi). From the Watts Rebellion, to the early stages of the L.A. Rebellion, we see how resistance is about rebelling for the right to represent themselves by challenging structures of power that work to dominate and oppress Others (Field et al. 3).

While the L.A. Rebellion's roots can be traced back through the history of Black filmmaking, it is important to emphasize that it also marks a cinematic era separate from earlier periods of filmmaking about Black Americans (Taylor "New U.S. Black Cinema"). This includes the following four distinct episodes: pre-WWI Hollywood films that featured Black individuals; post-WWI Hollywood films; independent films made by Black filmmakers such as Oscar Micheaux and Spencer Williams prior to WWII; and the blaxploitation films that came out of the late 1960s and early 1970s (Taylor "New U.S.

Black Cinema"; see also Cripps, *Black Film* 13-61; Cripps, *Slow Fade to Black* 70-89; Gaines, *Fire & Desire* 134-5; Jones 25-42; Massood 2-4). Interestingly, despite this rich history, these films and filmmakers are largely unrecognized within the broader cultural knowledge of U.S. film history. Instead, it is generally films that represent the white ideological mainstream of Hollywood – such as the infamously divisive *The Birth of a Nation* (1915) – that have become canonized. In *Fire & Desire: Mixed-Race Movies in the Silent Era* (2001), Jane Gaines suggests that, despite its white supremacist themes, D.W. Griffith's *The Birth of a Nation* has become seemingly synonymous to the birth of Hollywood, virtually eclipsing the existence of black-produced films before, and during, Griffith's time (93).

Early "race films" are notable for their resistance to racist representations in mainstream films (Gaines, *Fire & Desire* 254). Gaines describes these Black-produced films as attempts to "image back," meaning "to return the image of themselves given them by whites, to 'face off' against white-produced 'blackface'" (Gaines, *Fire & Desire* 254). It was a form of mimesis through which Black artists used the imitation of images, or the "*magical* inhabitation," to reclaim the power they were excluded from in white productions (Gaines, *Fire & Desire* 254-5; emphasis in original). Although L.A. Rebellion filmmakers were undoubtedly influenced by these early histories of Black film, what sets this "new" Black cinema apart is "its freedom from the mental colonization that Hollywood tries to impose on all its audiences, black and white" (Taylor "New U.S. Black Cinema"). Rather than imitate, the L.A. Rebellion was founded on the refusal and rejection of white-dominated representations by redefining the very possibilities of the film image. And while these earlier periods did indeed see work by independent

filmmakers outside of Hollywood, notably Oscar Micheaux, Spencer Williams, and the Johnson Brothers, there was still a particularly strong barrier facing Black women who wished to work with film (Gibson 195; Redding and Brownworth 191). While race itself is an issue for men and women with cinematic aspirations, the intersections of race, gender, and class form the intricate and volatile web of Hollywood's white ideological dominance. This new Black independent film movement stands out, then, as the first cinematic rebellion to the mainstream film industry, a rebellion that prioritized attention to gender, class, *and* racial issues in relation to the histories, aesthetics, and narratives representative of Black individuals and their communities ("Story of the L.A. Rebellion").

While in retrospect, this independent filmmaking movement may appear to carry on the same threads first woven by these early "race" films, the L.A. Rebellion cannot be identified by a single origin story. Instead, it is a movement with many different beginnings (Taylor, "Preface" ix). As it was fostered by the unique political and cultural climate of its time, it is difficult to attribute its emergence to any one moment in history. However, the Black Arts movement of the 1960s was particularly influential upon the rise of the L.A. Rebellion (Taylor "New U.S. Black Cinema"). Both movements were born out of a shared concern "with a self-determining black cultural identity" (Taylor "New U.S. Black Cinema"). Indeed, to strive towards a Black self-definition requires a dialectic that challenges the ways in which prevailing conceptions of "the self" have been influenced by a predominantly white world of European thought (Chinosole 155-6). It is thus through the philosophical, artistic, and political critiques of domination that a revolutionary shift in self-determining Black identity can overcome the hegemony of

Eurocentric history (Chinosole 135; Hill Collins 99-102). According to Taylor, "the Black Aesthetic was the critical, theoretical manifestation of the Black arts movement, and both together articulated cultural facets of 'Black Power'" (Taylor, *Mask of Art* 3). As a step towards cultural self-definition in a "White aesthetic" world, the Black Aesthetic can be likened to "profanity screamed in a chapel" (Taylor, *Mask of Art* 4). In other words, it marked a radical disruption and contestation of tradition, making it "unspeakable," in a way (Taylor, *Mask of Art* 4). At the same time, to speak the unspeakable would be a departure from the silencing and censorship effects of such traditions. In this sense, to speak the unspeakable becomes a form of resistance against an oppressive *status quo*.

Although not specific to the Black Arts movement, the rise of Black studies in postsecondary institutions offers parallels to the revolutionary aims of the Black Aesthetic, and as we will later see, the Black independent film movement. The inclusion of Black studies within U.S. university programs began in 1963 at Merritt Junior College in Oakland, California with a course entitled "Negro History" (Bobo et al. 2). Although the course itself was not deemed satisfactory by Black activists, it helped spark the rise of Black Studies programs across the country, which eventually saw 500 programs established by 1975 (Bobo et al. 3). As mentioned earlier, Elyseo Taylor was pivotal to the development of a Black-focused film studies program at UCLA (Field et al. 6). With the popularity of Taylor's community-oriented pedagogy, and the growing student activism and protest surrounding the lack of diversity in various UCLA departments, the film school included, several programs were introduced university-wide to address the concerns and needs of students of colour.

Importantly, an "Ethno-Communications initiative" was created with the aim of recruiting students of colour (including Black, Asian, Chicano, and Native American students), developing educational events for minority audiences, and enriching and diversifying UCLA's curricula in communications (Field et al. 10; "Story of the L.A. Rebellion"). It was through this active recruitment of aspiring artists from underrepresented communities that the L.A. Rebellion members got their start. And it was under Elyseo Taylor's guidance that they learned to take Black arts philosophies into practice by using, in his words, "film as a tool in community development," all while navigating their academic and artistic place within a still predominantly white environment (qtd. in Field et al. 11). According to Toni Cade Bambara, these members of the L.A. Rebellion lived by an alternative set of filmmaking philosophies, including their belief that: "accountability to the community takes precedence over training for an industry that maligns and exploits, trivializes, and invisibilizes Black people" (qtd. in Rocchio 173). Ultimately, their goals were to interrogate the conventions of mainstream cinema, to screen socially conscious content, and to consider alternatives that challenge past (mis)representations of Black individuals and communities (Rocchio 173).

As with the Black Arts movement, the establishment of Black Studies in the U.S. was fueled by a need for critique and resistance against mainstream ideologies and epistemologies, specifically including white American and Western European based scholarship (Bobo et al. 2; Taylor, *Mask of Art* 5). Faculty and students alike posed questions of canon, pondering the legitimacy of texts that perpetuated mainstream hegemonic perspectives of a primarily white male faculty (Bobo et al. 2). With the Black Arts movement, and later with the Black independent film movement, we see a resistance

towards “knowledge” and “truths” based on white perspectives of the world, and the canonization of such texts (and films) that worked to propagate such epistemological and ontological narratives (St. Clair Drake qtd. in Taylor, *Mask of Art* 5). Thus, while the L.A. Rebellion may have many beginnings, the cultural aims and artistic practices of these radical filmmakers were “inseparable from the political and social struggles and convulsions of the 1960s” (Masilela qtd. in Martin, “I Do Exist” 2). The social inequities facing people of colour, women, the lower classes and other marginalized groups boiled to the surface during the fiery political and cultural climate of the 1960s, making way for critical, and crucial, dialogues on race, representation, and belonging in education, in art, in film, and in the nation as a whole.

In the 1960s and 1970s, members of the Black independent film movement began to seek their own Black cinema aesthetic, drawing inspiration from the philosophies of the Black arts movement. In a way, these filmmakers were speaking the unspeakable through their cinematic (re)clamation of self-definition, by way of (re)centering Black narratives and aesthetics despite long histories of systematic silencing. Drawing inspiration from Third World theorists, philosophies of Black consciousness, the politics of the New Latin American Cinema movement, and the practices of the Black Arts Movement, these filmmakers worked in opposition to mainstream American film (Reid 10). As an oppositional cinema, the L.A. Rebellion created a “paradigm shift in the history of black independent filmmaking” (Reid 10). These young artists rejected the norms of a mainstream American film industry, opting instead for a narrative and aesthetic approach that could embrace the particular concerns and desires of audiences that did not fit the expectations of a white aesthetic (Martin, “I Do Exist” 2; Reid 10). If

the Black Arts movement was like profanity in church, we might understand the L.A. Rebellion as a roar unsettling the hush of a movie theatre. These filmmaker's unapologetic "expression of Black pride and dignity" ("Story of the L.A. Rebellion") was a rebellion against the domination of white ideologies and aesthetics in mainstream U.S. cinema. It was a breaking of cinema's silence on race – a resistance against the Hollywood orthodox.

And while we see the seeds of the L.A. Rebellion come to light in the late 1960s, flourishing through to the early 1990s, its roots can be traced back through many separate threads of Black radical traditions. Notably, the group's efforts are reminiscent of resistance efforts against slavery (Field et al. 1-2). Indeed, as filmmaker Ben Caldwell recalls when considering the group's adopted name, the *rebellion* in "L.A. Rebellion" is eerily, but perhaps not accidentally, reminiscent of *slave rebellion* ("L.A. Rebellion Oral Histories" 350). From the emancipation of the enslaved, to "emancipating the image" through filmmaking (Caldwell qtd. in "L.A. Rebellion Oral Histories" 332), the L.A. Rebellion carries on the Black radical tradition, which according to Michael T. Martin, sees "racism as a systemic practice that engenders inequality while legitimizing white privilege in virtually all sectors of American society: economy, culture, judiciary, education" (Martin, "Struggles for the *Sign*" 199). The tradition takes up philosophical, cultural, and political forms of resistance against the long line of racism in American history, from slavery and colonialism, to the Civil War and beyond (Martin, "Struggles for the *Sign*" 199).

The L.A. Rebellion, in line with Black radical tradition and the Black Arts movement, aimed to challenge systemic racism in the U.S. by reclaiming their histories,

their images, and their selves – creating in the process a cinematic landscape, and language, that offered space to the 'unspeakable' who have been (mis)spoken for, for far too long ("Story of the L.A. Rebellion"). The L.A. Rebellion was not just a moment *in* time, but a movement *through* time – from the past, the present, and towards a self-defining future.

Building Our Own House

A recent Twitter exchange between Julie Dash and acclaimed director Ava DuVernay, makes it clear that some of the central philosophies of the L.A. Rebellion continue today in the practice of many dedicated contemporary Black filmmakers. In an interview with *Time* magazine, DuVernay – who has directed such films as *Selma* (2014), *13th* (2016), and *A Wrinkle in Time* (2018) – discusses the issues facing Black women in the film industry. She suggests that the term "glass ceiling" is "violent," as it implies "pressure" and "struggle" ("Ava DuVernay"). Instead she opts for an alternative way of challenging and changing the structural inequities of mainstream American cinema, stating, "In general I think a lot less about breaking down *his* door, or shattering *his* ceiling, [and] more about building my own house" ("Ava DuVernay"). Like the members of the L.A. Rebellion, who helped forge new, innovative paths in Black American cinema for future generations of filmmakers, DuVernay carries on that legacy by breaking *away* from Hollywood traditions, rather than trying to break *into* them. On September 14, 2017, DuVernary tweeted a video clip from this part of the interview, along with the caption: "Build your own house" (@ava). Two weeks later, on September 27, 2017, Julie Dash retweeted the post from her official account, adding the comment: "Building Our Own

House!" (@JulieDash) Instead of waiting to be accepted into an exclusionary, white-male dominated industry, Dash, and her film descendent DuVernay, both value the spirit of self-definition as championed by the L.A. Rebellion, by striving for, and striding towards, new cinematic landscapes on their own terms.

This Twitter exchange recalls Audre Lorde's highly influential essay in *Sister Outsider* (1984), "The Master's Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master's House." In this essay, Lorde calls out feminism in general for its continuing, and still unchallenged ties to the patriarchy, and calls on white feminists in particular to recognize the significance of race alongside our understandings of gender. Critiquing these lingering hints of patriarchy within oppressive forms of feminism, she muses: "What does it mean when the tools of a racist patriarchy are used to examine the fruits of that same patriarchy? It means that only the most narrow perimeters of change are possible and allowable" (Lorde, *Sister Outsider* 110-11). In other words, feminist work will only continue to benefit white women, while excluding Black women, so long as white feminists refuse to address the patriarchal tools being used in discourse and praxis. Following this, Lorde argues, "For the master's tools will never dismantle the master's house. They may allow us to temporarily beat him at his own game, but they will never enable us to bring about genuine change" (*Sister Outsider* 112). Much like Dash and DuVernay encouraging the building of "our" own houses, Lorde believes that in order to foster more positive, inclusive feminist futures, it is imperative to challenge the principles that have perpetuated the oppression of minority groups, and to reject the forces that continue to uphold exclusionary, ideological structures. If feminists, and Black feminist filmmakers in particular, wish to see real

change, new tools must be crafted, and alternative paths must be pursued to break free from the cycle of white patriarchal domination.

Recognizing the limitations of Hollywood standards – narratively, aesthetically, and politically – members of the L.A. Rebellion refused to conform to the rules of the 'master's house'. Understanding that real change could not take place by using the very tools of a racist industry, the UCLA rebels opted for film styles and narrative forms that were more in line with African, Latin American, Asian, and European filmmakers who similarly worked against the Hollywood grain (Martin, "I Do Exist" 2; Reid 11). And much like Italian Neorealism and French New Wave film movements, the L.A. Rebellion faced many financial constraints (which often go hand-in-hand with an independent film praxis) but did not allow them to limit their creative vision. In a way, they actively embraced economic limitations, harnessing creative vivacity through their cinematic thriftiness. For example, some of the distinctive characteristics of the Black independent film movement are related to their resourcefulness, including: shooting scenes in familiar, urban locations; favoring discontinuous editing and nonlinear narratives; allowing 'bad' lighting as part of narrative and aesthetic techniques; and opting for handheld cameras, which created a characteristic trembling movement (Reid 11). The resultant gritty, candid aesthetic in many of these films was not the result of poor skills or lack of creativity, but actually an authentic amalgamation of talent, ingenuity, and commitment to a self-defining spirit (Davis, "Future of Black Film" 450). In defense of this purposefully imperfect cinema, Clyde Taylor, echoing Cuban filmmaker Julio García Espinosa, writes:

> [T]he triumphs of independent cinema must be appreciated within their 'imperfections,' even because of them, as they stand opposed to the 'perfections'

> of Hollywood: smoothly crafted, expensively-mounted spectacles where the film does all the work for the viewers and none of that work involves thinking about their own reality. (Taylor, "Future of Black Film" 457)

It was this fiscal frugality born out of an independent, "build your own house" attitude, that helped set the films of the L.A. Rebellion apart from other mainstream film productions.

Dash's 1983 short film, *Illusions* offers a cinematic representation of the L.A. Rebellion philosophy. Set in 1942 Hollywood, *Illusions* follows Mignon Duprée, a Black woman who 'passes' as white in order to work in an upper-level position in the film industry. As writer, director, and producer of the film, Dash works to deconstruct and challenge the racist and sexist foundations of Hollywood through a delicate portrayal of race, power, and spectatorship. As bell hooks argues, Dash "creates a filmic narrative wherein the black female protagonist subversively claims that space" (*Black Looks* 129). She adds that by "[i]nverting the 'real-life' power structure, [Dash] offers the black female spectator representations that challenge stereotypical notions that place us outside the realm of discursive practices" (*Black Looks* 129). In *Illusions*, the protagonist, Mignon, works at a Hollywood movie studio that specializes in wartime fiction films. Eager to represent a more unfiltered reality of WWII, Mignon proposes the idea to produce a film about the role of Indigenous peoples in the war effort, but her boss, C.J. Forrester, immediately dismisses it. Mignon suggests that with this story, they could be the first studio to depict the effects of war on the "average person" (Dash, "Illusions" 201). She points out the need for films that "give the public situations and characters that they can recognize as part of their own lives" (Dash, "Illusions" 201). Forrester does not

see the need for this reformation in cinematic representation, saying "Who cares about a group of Indians talking mumbo jumbo? Hell, it's a viable story but there's no audience for that kind of story" (Dash, "Illusions" 202). He then adds, "You want reality, let's go to the movies" (Dash, "Illusions" 202). With this, Dash prompts viewers to consider the very relationship between film and reality. If there is only a select cohort of studio executives who have the power to control the stories we hear, and the images we see, then how can we be sure what we are seeing is "reality"? Or better yet, whose reality is actually being represented? The very nature of the fictional film-within-a-film scenario of Dash's *Illusions* calls attention to the very constructedness of cinema – as art, as politics, and as a business. Indeed, even the title refers to the "illusions" of reality that film propagates.

Stylistically, Dash draws from the features of real 1940s Hollywood film noir, including the chiaroscuro-like use of light and shadow, the urban setting, and the use of black and white film (despite colour film being widely used in the 1980s when *Illusions* was released). In a way, Dash makes use of the familiar tropes and styles of old Hollywood films, but in so doing, turns this structure against itself. Dash takes us *inside* the master's house – through the doors that have long ignored the knocks of underrepresented artists, and to the other side of the walls that have long worked to exclude America's 'Others.' Her fiction works to permeate the walls – physically and figuratively – that have been set up in the real world. She destabilizes the very cinematic practices that have traditionally kept Black women out, while simultaneously calling out the normalization of the "white male's capacity to gaze, define, and know" (hooks, *Black Looks* 129). Through her film-within-a-film, she is able to place a Black woman inside

those walls and expose the exclusionary structures that work to uphold the mainstream film industry. As Mignon navigates her role in the film industry, struggling – but still striving – to share the stories of underrepresented communities, Dash reveals the ways in which gender, race, and sexuality haunt the house of Hollywood. In only thirty minutes, *Illusions* highlights the social relations and the structural inequalities that perpetuate dominant white-male ideologies.

In line with the L.A. Rebellion, Dash works outside of Hollywood's white-male-dominated system in order to effectively critique the social and political underpinnings that systematically keep underrepresented individuals, like her, away from the powers of filmmaking. However, the fact that Dash even engages with familiar Hollywood narratives and aesthetic styles (even as a means of resistance) has been critiqued (Hartman and Griffin 371; hooks, *Black Looks* 129). Although she was working to dismantle the master's house, creating a film that reflected Hollywood aesthetics required Dash to, in a way, pick up the master's tools. While turning to Hollywood – even to turn it inside out in the process – was not a typical feature of the L.A. Rebellion, this should not exclude *Illusions* from the movement altogether. For example, in a response to Lorde's essay on the master's house, Black feminist poet Mary Loving Blanchard (2002) suggests we rethink the tools, rather than reject them altogether. Blanchard suggests that her work as a Black feminist poet would not have been possible without the literary foundation of many white men and women (255). Although she recognizes the problems inherent to this white-dominant canon, Blanchard does not believe it is productive to reject the poetic tools she learned from her literary ancestors – Black and white (256-7). In her view, building new tools, like reinventing the wheel, would take away from

valuable time and energy that could be spent contributing to future canons of Black feminist poetry and literature (Blanchard 257). As she writes, "getting rid of the toolbox isn't necessary […] In our hands the tools become ammunition in the dismantling of his house, as we set about adding an extra" (Blanchard 256). Furthermore, she argues that it is wrong to assume that just because the tools were dominated by white writers for so long, that they actually belong to them. In her opinion, the tools belong to everybody, but it is what you do with them that truly counts in one's journey towards agency (Blanchard 257). Instead of reinventing the wheel, Blanchard suggests that these tools can be repurposed to fit the hands of Black feminist writers, and thus help them achieve their personal and political goals (256-7). In her own words, "each day that I find myself beating on that wall built to exclude me, I do so knowing that once that wall has been toppled then I must set about resurrecting it because it was beating on that wall that kept me from silence" (Blanchard 257). Like Dash's Mignon, Blanchard finds herself inside the walls of the master's house – inside the walls that once worked to exclude her. And instead of turning away from the tools, Blanchard uses the ones that work for her, while "retooling others so that they fit my hand" (257). Both Blanchard and Mignon aim to change the system from within. They work to alter the history of white-dominated narratives by writing their own. And while *Illusions* may engage with the master's tools, like a trojan horse infiltrating Hollywood's house, it does so only to dismantle its oppressive structures.

As the most well-known of Dash's films, *Daughters of the Dust* (1991) may be considered the cinematic apex of the L.A. Rebellion (Bambara xiii-xiv). Like *Illusions*, *Daughters of the Dust* employs "a deconstructive filmic practice to undermine existing

grand cinematic narratives" (hooks, *Black Looks* 130). Taking a step further, however, *Daughters of the Dust* does not employ Hollywood styles or tropes to emphasize racial tension, but instead works within a more postcolonial, Afrocentric aesthetic tradition. Dash's film unapologetically situates Black female bodies in the frontlines of the frame (Bambara xiii; hooks, *Black Looks* 130). They are not relegated to the margins, nor are they positioned as a blurred backdrop to a 'normalized' white subject; rather, their presence helps reveal the reality of Black female subjectivities. As hooks argues, it does not "simply offer diverse representations," but actually helps "imagine new transgressive possibilities for the formulation of identity" (*Black Looks* 130).

Similarly, Jennifer Machiorlattie (2005) describes *Daughters of the Dust* as having a Black feminist narrative style characterized by "recollection and remembering so that stereotypes can be subverted, inaccurate historical representation corrected, and new aesthetic choices and forms ... that diffuse dominant forms" (98). As Ella Shohat and Robert Stam (2014) argue, these dominant aesthetic forms tend to privilege plot and character, which leads to a "slighting of the specifically cinematic dimensions of the films" (208). In other words, Eurocentric discourse in film tends to favour more traditionally 'literary' characteristics over such things as lighting, framing, *mise-en-scène*, and music (Shohat and Stam 208). Black writers and artists, however, might feel that a counter-narrative, or a nonlinear plot, can more appropriately encapsulate the particular experience of slavery and the Diaspora (Brand, "*Ars Poetica*" 59-60; *Map to the Door* 42). "Pray for a life without plot," poet Derek Walcott writes, "a day without narrative" (qtd. in Brand, *Map to the Door* 42). With a film like *Daughters of the Dust*, which is relatively minimal in terms of plot (in a mainstream narrative sense), a Eurocentric

approach might not even attempt to appreciate the depth of the unique, technical cinematic qualities that are actually essential to understanding the narrative (after all, plot is not the only means to narrative). For example, Shohat and Stam show how *Daughters of the Dust* "deploys an African 'talking drum' to drive home, if only subliminally, the Afrocentric thrust of a film dedicated to the diasporic culture of the Gullah people" (209-10; see also Dash, "Making *Daughters*" 16; G. Tate, "Homegirl Goddesses" 72). This use of sound and music might be perceived as 'subliminal,' but it is nonetheless essential for understanding the thematic significance of race, history, and belonging in this Black feminist narrative.

Filmmakers of the L.A. Rebellion challenged Hollywood's tools on many grounds, from the use of sound, to storytelling, to camera techniques. For example, reflecting on some of the production challenges faced during the making of *Daughters*, Dash says, "our [choice of] film stock was very, very, very conscious" ("L.A. Rebellion Oral Histories" 340). After trying various different kinds of film, she describes settling on a negative stock called Agfa-Gavaert because it held orange tones which she found were most complimentary to Black skin tones ("L.A. Rebellion Oral Histories" 340). With an all-Black cast, many of whom were "very dark-skinned," Dash felt it was a priority to choose a film stock that would best capture the warmth and elegance of these Gullah characters ("L.A. Rebellion Oral Histories" 340). For Dash, film stock was not merely another tool to capture an image, but a pathway towards the prioritization of Black aesthetics, where the (re)centering of Black bodies leads to the reclamation of the filmic frame, and to the representation of Black experiences beyond a white framework.

Interestingly, *Illusions* provides us with another example of the power of physical film. In an early scene where Mignon prepares to pitch her Navajo story idea to her boss, there are several posters on the wall that reflect the studio's specialization in war-themed films. One poster depicts a soldier with a video camera and reads, "For Good Shooting in 1943 Depend on Du Pont Cine Film." Another poster features the text, "Films for the Fight," advertising Agfa Raw Film Corporation. Here, we see how a choice in physical film can become a political act. In a Hollywood studio that produces war films, Dash shows how films can factor into the propagation of politics and patriotism, and specifically with the U.S.'s involvement in WWII. Film stock thus holds not just material significance, but metaphorical significance. With the poster of the soldier, the parallel between shooting a gun and shooting film points to the real-life effects of cinema. As both a material and a metaphoric tool of representation, film has a bodily affect – on those in front of the camera, and those who watch the images on screen. In the context of *Illusions* as Dash's creative product, we may interpret such statements as "Films for the Fight" for a different kind of fight: a fight for the powers of representation and self-definition.

A third poster, featured in a later scene with Mignon speaking to her mother over the phone, emphasizes the structural inequities of the film industry. In a small phone booth, Dash talks to her mother about the problems she is facing in the business, and how she does not feel she can reveal herself as Black at the risk of losing her job. On the wall behind her is a single poster, which reads, "I am so an American, Sonny. No matter what your race or religion." Looking at the poster, one might think that the film studio is quite progressive, or liberal-minded. However, the context of Mignon's words helps to strip the

walls of this illusion. Additionally, Dash includes a description of the poster in the screenplay, which reads: "A positive message for people of German descent living in America during the war years" (Dash, "Illusions" 205). As Mignon says to her mother, "I was hoping things would be different after the war … someday, Mama, everything in this country will change, and I want to be a part of that change […] if it doesn't happen here first in this industry, then I don't think it will happen at all" (Dash, "Illusions" 205-6). Dash's dialogue reveals the reality of racism in the film industry – a reality that is hidden, covered like a mere bandage across the studio walls. In a way, these posters propagate false images to uphold the divisive structures of the film industry. Mignon's conversation with her mother – a link to her cultural identity, which I discuss further in Chapter 3 – suggests that the posters are just another veil between illusions and reality. The walls that they adorn – the walls of the master's house – embody the exclusionary realities of Hollywood.

Dash did not take technical production matters lightly, as can be seen from her approach to film stock; production details represented the physical and poetic potential for a Black film aesthetic. Dash's attention to the possibilities of film stock was mirrored also in her attention to the possibilities of hairstyling. While she was studying at the American Film Institute (before she was accepted at UCLA), Dash worked as an intern on the popular miniseries *Roots* (1977). She recalls asking the hairdressers on set, whom she noticed were all white, why they were giving the slave women characters "*pressed* hair" (G. Tate, "Homegirl Goddesses" 78; emphasis in original; see also Bastien). They replied that it was because slave women would have tried to "emulate their masters" (G. Tate, "Homegirl Goddesses" 78). Dash found this odd, especially considering she had never

observed this kind of European-inspired hairstyle in images from that era (G. Tate, "Homegirl Goddesses" 78). About a decade later, when filming *Daughters*, Dash made it a priority to show Black women with hairstyles that represented their African heritage, including styles from Senegal, the Ivory Coast, and Madagascar (G. Tate, "Homegirl Goddesses" 72). When the film was eventually critiqued for being 'all about hair,' Dash defended her decision, stating, "There's a lot of drama around Black hair […] I could try and be a filmmaker who was myopic about it, like this really isn't an issue, but it would be untrue" (qtd. in G. Tate, "Homegirl Goddesses" 78). Pointing out that while most other films have white women with many different hairstyles, she observes that it seems it is only when Black women wear something "other than a doo-rag" that one becomes "self-conscious in the follicle area" (qtd. in G. Tate, "Homegirl Goddesses" 78). In her words, "I wanted these women to look like nothing you've ever seen on the screen before, and I wanted them to have ancient hairstyles" (qtd. in G. Tate, "Homegirl Goddesses" 78). Thus, her aesthetic attention to hair was not merely about appearances, but about redefining the images that have dominated our screens, and (re)writing an aesthetic history that (re)centers African, and African American history and heritage.

Just as Dash's choices in details such as film stock and hairstyling were deliberate and reflective of L.A. Rebellion philosophies, so too were her choices in cinematography. Dash assigned Arthur Jafa, an innovative artist who shared in the revolutionary vision of the Black independent film movement, as the director of cinematography for *Daughters*. Interested in how, in his words, "Black people in America […] have always had to make art out of absence – whether that be the absence of accurate portrayal, or even of basic materials," Jafa worked to redefine Black images by challenging the expectations of film

and photography (Brinkhurst-Cuff). For example, in the making of *Daughters*, he questioned "whether the standard of twenty-four-frames-per-second rate is kinesthetically the best for rendering the black experience" (Bambara xv). While twenty-four frames per second is the standard rate for most films, Jafa was not afraid to experiment and push the boundaries of cinematography to experiment and explore the phenomenological possibilities of Black film.

In a preface to Dash's book, *Daughters of the Dust: The Making of an African American Woman's Film* (1992), Toni Cade Bambara offers a wonderfully astute analysis of Jafa's unconventional use of frame rates. She describes one particular scene on the Sea Island beach – home to the Peazant family – where a change in the frame rate creates a subtle slow motion to highlight the thematic significance of family and history (xv). In this scene, Viola Peazant, a devout Christian woman, speaks to Mr. Snead, a Black photographer commissioned to document the family's journey north. Together, they stand in the foreground of the frame, while two younger boys can be seen playing on the beach in the background. Mr. Snead, a city man, makes a joke about the Gullah as "Salt Water Negroes" who believe in superstition and magic, to which a slightly embarrassed Viola says, "Oh they spoil their children with dreams, wishes, magic … But then, they're the most important members of the family. The children, and the old souls" (Dash, "Script" 136). As Viola says this, she turns towards the beach, where the camera pulls in closer to the boys in the background, framed between the two adults. The frame rate changes to create a subtle slow-motion effect, while a slow dissolve transition brings the two boys into focus. The boys are going through a series of hand gestures and movements in what appears to be a choreographed ritual: whether they are playing or telling a story, the boys

gestures represent a form of communication, perhaps a language passed on through generations.

With both the slow-motion effect of the boys on the beach, and Viola's assertion of the importance of children and "old souls" as a polite rebuke to Mr. Snead's comment, Bambara suggests that Jafa's change in frame rate helps emphasize the significance of "children as the future" upon the Peazant family's imminent journey north (xv). She adds, "For a split second we seem to travel through time to a realm where children are eternally valid and are eternally the reason for right action" (xv). According to Bambara, the blurred effect of Jafa's altered frame rate captures a moment in time – to blend, in a way, past, present and future in a hint towards the nonlinear possibilities of alternative historical narratives. Similarly, Christina Sharpe suggests that the shift from twenty-four to sixteen frames per second helps draw attention to our own ways of seeing and to reconsider how we, as spectators, are implicated in the space of the screen (126). While the camera captures the present of Viola and Mr. Snead's conversation, the manipulation of motion asks viewers to consider the relationship between our histories and our futures – from Viola and Mr. Snead reflecting on the place of old Gullah traditions upon the present, to the boys on the beach who represent the future. Through the passing on of traditions, the children will eventually become the "old souls." Here, Jafa challenges not only film conventions, but cultural conceptions of time. In a sense, Jafa's cinematography becomes a choreography – a choreography of bodies blurred, blending between pasts, presents, and futures.

Dash's decision to work with Jafa on the cinematography of *Daughters* is just one example of the way in which she used her filmmaking and political concerns to "contest

Hollywood's conventions of storytelling, as well as its complicity in American racism" (Martin, "I Do Exist" 2). In a 2015 interview regarding the L.A. Rebellion's rocky relationship with Hollywood, Dash says:

> When we call ourselves film-makers it's because we wrote, produced, knew how to do the sound, operate the camera, to light, and when we took it into post [production] we'd edit our films physically, as well as mix the sound. We were totally immersed in it. We weren't making films to be paid, or to satisfy someone else's needs. We were making films because they were an expression of ourselves: what we were challenged by, what we wanted to change or redefine, or just dive into and explore. (Dash qtd. in Clark)

For Dash, filmmaking was not about profit. It was about the process. The becoming. It was about becoming a storyteller, an artist, a researcher, a revolutionary, a rebel who works to challenge and redefine how we can understand and represent our histories, our communities, and in the process, our own lives. Film, according to Dash, should be an expression, and an extension, of the self.

Dash's attention to such things as hair styling and body language highlights her narrative commitment to the (re)writing of underrepresented Black histories. For example, the hand signals used in the scene with the boys on the beach, as well as in an earlier scene with two adult men who cross paths in a wooded area, demonstrates the ways in which hidden histories actually persist through familiar features of contemporary life. In her book on the making of *Daughters*, Dash explains that these hand signals are "a reference to the nonverbal styles of communication of ancient African secret societies which have been passed down across thousands of years and through hundreds of

generations," to which she adds, "Today these forms are expressed in the secret fraternities and in the hand signals of youth gangs" (6). Similar to her inclusion of hand gestures amongst the male characters, she also insures that body language is central to the character development of, and communication between, the female characters. For example, she states that body language was particularly important in West African traditions, citing the characteristic way in which women would place their hands on their hips, which was first seen in the U.S. amongst slave women (G. Tate, "Homegirl Goddesses" 78). So, too, is averting one's eyes out of respect for an elder a behaviour rooted in West African tradition, but still evident in many Black communities today (G. Tate, "Homegirl Goddesses" 78; see also hooks, *Black Looks* 115). Whether it is through the hand signals of youth gangs, or the everyday interactions between a mother and child, Dash claims that, "those motor habits persist" (qtd. in G. Tate, "Homegirl Goddesses" 78). And as these habits persist, so too does history – through tradition, through language, through the body.

Body language thus becomes an important part of the communication – sometimes even more important than the dialogue – in *Daughters* (G. Tate, "Homegirl Goddesses" 78). Even as a young girl, Dash describes being confused by some of the body language and ritual behaviour she witnessed amongst the people in her community, for example, the pouring of libations on a basketball court (Dash, "Making *Daughters*" 6). However, it was through her archival research for the film that she learned about the meanings behind these actions, and how they could be traced back to West African traditions. In a way, Dash's process of researching, writing, and filming history became a way of remembering, learning, and representing her 'self.' By (re)writing African

American history through *Daughters*, she was able to make sense of the things she experienced, but did not fully understand, as a child. Realizing the (sometimes) subtle ways in which history resonates through contemporary bodies, Dash was determined "to see the past as connected to the future" (Dash, "Making *Daughters*" 6). In her words, "The story had to show hope, as well as the promise that tradition and family and life would always sustain us, even in the middle of dramatic change" (Dash, "Making *Daughters*" 6). Here, we can see how many of the images in *Daughters* are reminiscent not only of the real histories of Black communities, but are also reflected in the behaviour and language of many Black Americans to this day. As with the boys on the beach, children become one with the ancestors – just as our present blends into our future, our futures retain, and contain, our pasts.

In a way, we might consider this use of language as another example of the L.A. Rebellion's commitment to alternative filmmaking philosophies and community-oriented practices. If, as Lorde argues, "the master's tools will never dismantle the master's house" (*Sister Outsider* 112), then the L.A. Rebellion worked to craft their own tools and build their own houses. By including nonverbal forms of West African and Gullah communication into her screenwriting, Dash tackles the hegemony of the English language (Macedo et al. 8; Philip, *She Tries Her Tongue* 56-9). Dash's unapologetic commitment to Black culture and identity, despite histories of oppression and systematic silencing, is reminiscent of the praxis of Senegalese director Safi Faye. Faye found the visual nature of film effective for challenging the colonial hauntings in her home country, Senegal, because it allowed her to represent herself, and other African men and women, without relying on their colonizer's language – French – to do so (Kelly and Robson 12;

Williams-Hawkins 31). She saw the potential in film for sharing personal and post-colonial stories while rejecting the master's tools – in this case, the oppressive tool of the French language (Ellerson 24; Williams-Hawkins 31). Although Faye was working in African cinema, her philosophy appears to be shared by members of the L.A. Rebellion. According to director Haile Gerima, one of the leading members of this Black independent film movement:

> I couldn't imagine how a white supremacist structure such as Hollywood, an industry of culture that has created havoc to all human beings, could be a base for me to peacefully tell my story and experiment. Hollywood didn't have any obligation to tolerate my search in form. The only term that Hollywood accepts is the commercial mold. And once you cease to operate within that paradigm, the industry will reject all the reasons you have to tell a story. (qtd. in Reid 11)

Like Faye, Gerima and other members of the L.A Rebellion refused to work within the house that had long-perpetuated their own experience of (cinematic) subjugation. While the mainstream film industry held the tools, and thus, the power of representation, in the hands of rebels with a revolutionary vision, the tool of film is transformed. It becomes a powerful medium to push the boundaries of language and storytelling in a (post-)colonial world.

In addition to her inclusion of rituals and body language as an important part of communication in *Daughters*, Dash also put a lot care into the details of the film's spoken dialogue. Although Dash had originally intended to have *Daughters* begin in the Gullah language, with subtitles, before transitioning into a Gullah dialect, she realized that some audiences might have trouble understanding it (G. Tate, "Homegirl Goddesses" 72).

However, this made her think about her own experiences as a moviegoer. She recalls having difficulty following the English dialogue in other popular films, citing the 1990 Coen brother's gangster film, *Miller's Crossing* as one such example (G. Tate, "Homegirl Goddesses" 72). She says, "It made me realize that I've done that all my life, pushed through on accents until I understood them. Why is it with *Daughters of the Dust* that people almost seem offended by it?" (qtd. in G. Tate, "Homegirl Goddesses" 72). Dash decided to carry through with her plan to stay true to her history and her own realities, and have her characters speak in a thick Gullah dialect throughout the film. And while she realized that it may alienate certain audiences, she felt this was an important part of pushing the linguistic boundaries and expectations of U.S. cinema. As she stresses, "We've grown up translating. We have no other choice" (qtd. in G. Tate, "Homegirl Goddesses" 72). In other words, not having to continually translate dialogue may be considered a form of privilege. Therefore, when experiencing something outside the mainstream, or something difficult to understand, does not mean one should be exempt from listening altogether. If anything, it should be all the more reason to listen carefully. As Hélène Cixous (2005) writes, "If only we listen, a language always speaks several languages at once, and runs with a single word in opposite directions" (xii).

Dash is not merely opening the doors to the house of Hollywood – or in other words, conforming to dominant languages or modes of storytelling – but instead (re)claiming alternative 'tools' of communication that exist outside of mainstream narratives and histories. The hand gestures and Gullah dialect become a part of the story. They are not explicitly translated, or explained within the film, but exist in their own right as legitimate experiences and expressions of Gullah culture, and as very real

representations of histories that are not often acknowledged in mainstream cinema. As she says of her use of Gullah ritual and language, "All this kind of stuff became normal to me, not something you have to point out. So when I have stuff like that in my films, it's not like, look, we're about to pour on this ritual now. See these things as a part of our everyday life. It's our culture and tradition" (qtd. in G. Tate, "Homegirl Goddesses" 78). Dash drew from her childhood observations of rituals and language, as well as from her archival research on Gullah history, and from this was able to craft a narrative that blended pasts and presents not as a documentary or an ethnographic way of teaching audiences, but rather as an honest and artistic representation of personal and collective experiences of being Black in the United States.

In line with Lorde and Faye's philosophies, Dash, and other members of the L.A. Rebellion, viewed film as a potential tool to dismantle the master's house – if used tactically. Filmmaking was about pushing boundaries and resisting the structures that uphold forces of oppression – language included. With their open rejection of Hollywood structures and standards, Dash and the L.A. Rebellion filmmakers sparked a "paradigm shift" that opened up new ways of representing Black voices, Black bodies, and Black histories on camera (Reid 10-11). With this, we see what kinds of stories can emerge if we challenge the very conventions of filmmaking. By rejecting the master's tools, the filmmakers of the L.A. Rebellion helped conceive and create a cinematic landscape that worked to represent individuals and communities that existed beyond the borders of Hollywood.

Between Hood and Hollywood: Journey to the House of Self

In a 1979 interview on the UCLA student film cable program entitled, "The View" ("L.A. Rebellion – Julie Dash"), fellow L.A. Rebellion filmmaker Barbara McCullough spoke with Dash about her film, *The Diary of an African Nun* (1977), which was adapted from Alice Walker's short story of the same name. In this short interview, Dash discusses the film program at UCLA, saying, "I did look forward to coming to UCLA to use their facilities, because it is very hard as an independent filmmaker to attempt, and bring to completion, an independent film without the sound stages and equipment and so on" ("L.A. Rebellion – Julie Dash"). Following this, McCullough asked Dash how she would manage these obstacles once she had moved on from UCLA. Dash stated that the films she would make beyond graduation would depend on the kind of funding she could acquire. As she admitted, "It's really about money, more than anything else" ("L.A. Rebellion – Julie Dash"). This suggests that, despite one's artistic aspirations, without sufficient financial support, some film projects do not get the chance to be seen on screen (Davis, "Future of Black Film" 449). As discussed earlier, L.A. Rebellion filmmakers were faced with particularly difficult financial situations (after all, Hollywood had the money, but the L.A. Rebellion did not want Hollywood). However, they worked around these restraints, creating a characteristic gritty style out of their limited materials and resources. At the same time, filmmaking is an expensive endeavour, even when you take a more prudent route. Even if the stories are there, and the creative vision is vivid, the issue of money is a very real concern. And if funding issues can limit the stories we hear and the images we see, this can lead to the underrepresentation of certain communities, and a potentially skewed reflection of the realities of the world.

When I hear a young Julie Dash speak of money as a crude, yet crucial component of being a filmmaker, I am reminded of Virginia Woolf's text, *A Room of One's Own* (2004). In this influential feminist essay, she claims: "A woman must have money and a room of her own if she is to write fiction" (4). According to Woolf, women have been underrepresented as writers not because they lack the necessary talent, but because they have not been afforded the same financial support and creative independence as their male counterparts. In an industry dominated by (white) men, filmmakers like Julie Dash face the same obstacles that have plagued women storytellers and artists for centuries. While Woolf's argument has been highly influential in discussions of women artists and writers, as well as their place in the canon, it is missing several pieces of the intersectional puzzle. If we consider Audre Lorde's plea to dismantle the master's house, is it still wise to ask for a room in 'his' house? Or as Ava DuVernay recently mused, should we be knocking on his door or should we be building our own houses?

In a reply to Ava DuVernay's tweet to "Build your own house," journalist Michele Norris writes, "Say it. And plant your own gardens. Don't wait for others to bring you flowers" (@michele_norris). This comment, which was "liked" by DuVernay herself, evokes American writer Alice Walker's book, *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens* (1983). Interestingly, there is also a connection here between Walker and her literary ancestor Woolf. In her titular essay, Walker analyzes Woolf's feminist plea from the perspective of not only gender, but from issues of race and class as well. She critiques Woolf's claim that a woman must have a room of her own and enough money to support herself if she is to write (235). Walker ponders what this might mean for Black women writers who have not experienced the privilege of existing solely as a "woman," but exist

instead within the "triple-bind" as women writers of colour (Minh-ha, *Woman, Native, Other* 6; Walker 235). What of women who not only lack access to a room of their own, but also to such categories as "woman," or even "human" (Jackson 669-72; see also Combahee River Collective 16; Philip, *Genealogy of Resistance* 25; Truth 231)? As Dash says, "Historically […] African American women never had the luxury of being simply *a woman*" (Dash and hooks 50; emphasis in original). Walker offers the example of the eighteenth-century poet Phillis Wheatley, who, as a slave, did not own *herself* let alone a room with lock and key (Walker 235). If Woolf's hypothetical sixteenth-century poet was constrained by patriarchy to the point of ill health and insanity, what can we expect for an enslaved woman like Wheatley, who, also a poet, faced not only triple negation as a Black woman artist, but also faced exclusion from the Euroethnic category of 'human'? Because Black women have been stripped of the privilege of a room altogether throughout history – and to the distinct designation of simply "woman" – Walker works to legitimize the significance of alternative artistic spaces. Instead of searching for a room of her own, Walker imagines the potential of her mother's garden (241). She argues that the garden, while not a room with lock and key, is still a fruitful creative space where stories are passed on like the seeds of flowers (Walker 241). Walker does not reject the argument put forth by Virginia Woolf altogether; rather she revisits it, reevaluates it, and in a way, rewrites it.

Considering these various incarnations, and impositions, of the master's house – of rooms, of walls, of doors, of ceilings – what becomes, then, of the home? Where do 'our' mother's gardens grow? According to Chinosole, the house and home are common motifs in Black American literature, from Alice Walker to Audre Lorde to Toni Morrison,

and many others (Chinosole 142). For example, Lorde's biomythography, *Zami: A New Spelling of My Name* (2003) traces her journey to "the house of the self," through what Chinosole calls "matrilineal diaspora" (135). In Chinosole's words, matrilineal diaspora encompasses:

> The capacity to survive and aspire to be contrary and self-affirming across continents and generations. It names the strength and beauty we pass on as friends and lovers from foremothers to mothers and daughters allowing us to survive radical changes and be empowered through differences. Matrilineal diaspora defines the links among Black women worldwide, enabling us to experience distinct but related cultures while retaining a special sense of home as the locus of self-definition and power (Chinosole 135).

In the Black Diaspora – which refers to the forced displacement of Africans through the transatlantic slave trade – the sense of connection between Black women across borders, seas, and time is important for navigating the self through dislocations of space (Chinosole 136; Quashie 1-2). With the dispersal of African peoples across the world at the hands of colonial European ideological powers, for many existing in the Diaspora, the concept of home is not easily definable. Borders become arbitrary, and belonging becomes dubious. In the Diaspora, home is not always tangible or spatial. Instead, it is something emotional, spiritual, and mythical. For Lorde, it is her African and Caribbean ancestors who compose the "cultural pathways in the journey to her selves" (Chinosole 141). Matrilineal diaspora represents the legendary and historical connections across borders and seas to Africa, the Caribbean, and other spaces of the Diaspora where Black women "form the critical link in her diasporic chain" (Chinosole 140). The journey home

is a journey to "the house of self" (Chinosole 135). And the journey to this house can be mapped through ancestral connections – through the stories and histories carried across land, sea, and time.

Dash's films may be considered a cinematic embodiment of Lorde's matrilineal diaspora. The experiences and images of Black women are not relegated to the background or the margins of the frames as they had been in many mainstream films. Instead, Dash situates Black women at the centre – physically and figuratively, through both cinematography and narrative. For Dash, filming *Daughters* was about finding the connections between women, despite their differences – despite their religious beliefs, their career choices, their romantic partners, their skin colour (see Chapter 4 for a discussion of "Yellow Mary"), and attitude towards Gullah tradition. *Daughters* is, in Greg Tate's (1991) words, "an interrogation of Black America's cleft soul, split between the quest for modernity and a hunger for the replenishment of roots" (72). He adds, "zeroing in on the family's women, it captures the shifting faces of dignity, denial, yearning, and elegance that give shape and meaning to Black female subjectivity" ("Homegirl Goddesses" 72). Even when the Peazant family is torn between the promises of the future, and their trust in the past, the women thrive through the unbreakable bond of the diasporic chain, held together through the continued presence of the ancestors.

Despite Dash's commitment to her own matrilineal diasporic histories through her films, she still faced critique over the authenticity of her representation of the Black American experience in the Diaspora. Dash experienced a lack of moral and monetary support in making both *Illusions* and *Daughters of the Dust*. While filming *Illusions* as a film student, she was told that the sound-recording technology depicted was not actually

available in the 1940s (G. Tate, "Favorite Daughters" 32). However, Dash believed that this preoccupation with historical accuracy was misguided. In a 1988 news article on her work, she is quoted as saying, "They tell you film is a fantasy medium where you can do anything you want and then say you can't make a film because some technology wasn't invented yet" (qtd. in G. Tate, "Favorite Daughters" 32). She adds, "They make films about black people that have *nothing to do with reality* all the time" (qtd in G. Tate, "Favorite Daughters" 32; emphasis in original). It was Dash's disillusionment with Hollywood's misrepresentation of Black lives and histories that fueled her desire to make *Illusions* in the first place. To focus solely on historical accuracy was to overlook the film's actual *rewriting* of historical narratives through the exposure of Hollywood's exploitation and exclusion of Black voices.

Similar to her experience with *Illusions,* Dash faced resistance in the making of *Daughters*. In an interview with film scholar Michael T. Martin (2010), Julie Dash discusses the question of authenticity regarding race and place in film. In her words:

> It was a foreign distributor who said *Daughters of the Dust* wasn't an authentic African American film. It wasn't like, from the hood, which is interesting to me, having grown up in the hood. Ironically, those filmmakers who make the 'hood' films haven't necessarily grown up in the hood. It's exotica to them. I hope to be around when history takes a look back at all of this. I think it's time for some black social scientist to step in and ask some pertinent questions. (qtd. in Martin, "I Do Exist" 7)

When trying to secure funding to film *Daughters*, she found that mainstream movie studios liked how the film looked but could not understand it. They were confused about

why a Black woman filmmaker would want to make a film about a Black, female-centered family in the early 1900s (Dash, "Making *Daughters*" 8). They were not used to seeing a Black American film that wasn't set in the ghetto, or without scenes of sex, murder, and violence (Dash, "Making *Daughters*" 8). Dash writes, "They thought the film would be unmarketable. They believed that they knew better than we did about what moved black people" (Dash, "Making *Daughters*" 8). She suggests that this response is due to the fact that white men are the ones who get to determine what movie audiences will or will not see (G. Tate, "Homegirl Goddesses" 78). In a way, it was as if Dash was living the reality of the fictional Mignon in *Illusions*. Despite Mignon's attempts to bring the stories of marginalized 'Others' to the silver screen, it is a white male executive who determines what stories *he believes* American audiences want to see. With *Daughters*, not only was Dash being told who her audience should be (one funding agency told her to write something that appealed to white Midwesterners), but she was being told it was not authentically African American (G. Tate, "Favorite Daughters" 33; Martin, "I Do Exist" 7).

With perseverance, Dash found financial support from two key sources that would help *Daughters* become a reality: first from Women Make Movies Too, who raised $5000 for production, and then from American Playhouse, which ended up providing most of the remaining funds needed (Dash, "Making *Daughters*" 9). Through this financial support, Dash was able to complete her first feature film without compromising her artistic vision. However, not every filmmaker is so fortunate. There are still stories that remain untold because they do not fit the mold of what is *expected* of Black American cinema (Davis, "Future of Black Film" 351). And even Dash continued to face funding

problems, even after *Daughters* was released to critical acclaim, which I outline in the Introduction to this thesis (Martin, "I Do Exist" 3). But despite this resistance, Dash stayed true to the L.A. Rebellion's journey towards self-definition. Although she was asked to conform to more mainstream narratives, she stood her ground, stating, "I will not manipulate certain things that have to do with my culture to please someone else. I've been asked to do that and I have refused. Perhaps I'm seen as difficult. I see it as being true to myself" (qtd. in Martin, "I Do Exist" 4).

According to Dash, resistance against her work was founded on the fear of Black people reclaiming the power of representation. In her words:

> The image of the black revolutionary was neutralized through caricature during the blaxploitation era. He was made to seem weak and a phony. Now there exists a fear of black people using our culture to make statements in code. It's the modern variation on the fear that led slaveholders to take our drums away (qtd. in G. Tate, "Favorite Daughters" 33).

Racism and sexism are at the root of Dash's exclusion from institutional funding opportunities (G. Tate, "Favorite Daughters" 33). As Greg Tate aptly summarizes, "What Dash has come up against here is the arrogance of someone else's ignorance – an arrogance fortified by what appears to be the common belief that blacks' self-knowledge is like no knowledge at all" ("Favorite Daughters" 33).

For Dash, the 'hood' was home, but this was not what she wanted to bring to the screen. Home existed as something beyond the boundaries set up for her. It was something that existed through stories, through language, through myth, through history – through ancestral connections beyond the borders of land and sea. Her self-knowledge

was rooted in the *what if* – of the narrative and spatial possibilities beyond the borders within which she grew up (see also Chapter 4). Not only the spatial boundaries of the Queensbridge projects, but the artistic and narrative boundaries that shaped what she perceived as possible for herself as a young Black woman. According to bell hooks (2009), "It is the telling of our history that enables political self-recovery" (103). As *Illusions* demonstrates, Black filmmakers cannot rely on the history of Black representation laid out for them by mainstream cinema, therefore it is necessary to rewrite the script of film history and dismantle the house of Hollywood. Or as Lorde and Blanchard might put it, it is necessary to resist and reshape the narrative and aesthetic tools of mainstream cinema by filming their own. Julie Dash and other members of the L.A. Rebellion wished not for a room of their own, necessarily, but instead worked to reclaim alternative spaces by cultivating their own cinematic gardens. To use Walker's imagery, these are gardens in which they could tell their own stories, in their own form, and then share those artistic seeds with the next generation of filmmakers. Filmmaking thus becomes a journey towards self-recovery, self-definition, and self-representation. To create new stories and new images, is to create another history for the future of Black American filmmakers. Through Dash's filmmaking, home becomes history, and history, in a way, becomes home through the matrilineal journey to the house of self.

Chapter 3:

Shadows of the Cinematic Self: From Auteurs to Autobiographical Ancestors

Fiction became the agency of my efforts to answer the questions:
Who am I, what am I, how did I come to be?
What shall I make of the life around me, what celebrate, what reject […]?
What does American society *mean* when regarded out of my *own* eyes, when informed by my *own* sense of the past and viewed by my *own* complex sense of the present?
Ralph Ellison (*Shadow and Act*, xxii)

Scene 2: National Studios, Hollywood, 1942.

Mignon Duprée, a Black female executive assistant who is passing as white, is assigned the task of salvaging a film production whose audio and visual tracks have become distorted. She hires Ester Jeeter to dub the singing voice of the actress in the film. The actress on screen is blonde and white. Ester is Black. While her voice will save the out-of-sync production, Ester still aspires to be seen, and not just heard in Hollywood - to lift the illusory veil of the voiceover. Grateful to Mignon for employing her and for advocating for her rights as an artist in the industry, Ester invites her to take a walk around the studio. As they tour the lots, Mignon comments on the problems in Hollywood – of race, representation, and the ultimate, and undeniable power of the motion pictures. Pausing to rest her back gently against a wall, Mignon says with a hint of desolation, "People make films about themselves … What they want, what they love, what they fear most. We were nothing but props in their stories, or musical props or dancing props, or comic relief." With a shake of her head, she adds, "I came into this world of moving shadows and I made this work for me. But I made what work? …"

A long shot shows Mignon and Ester standing just outside a movie set, their bodies framed by a tall, narrow doorway leading inside. The camera pulls away, moving further into the studio. The doorway is open, yet seemingly impassable. The further the camera retreats into the studio, the greater is its distance from Mignon and Ester. They look in as the camera looks out, their bodies bordering Hollywood's horizons. Shadowy figures, distant and still. Standing their ground.

"People make films about themselves," Mignon Duprée declares in *Illusions*, Julie Dash's short film about a 1940s Hollywood movie studio. Dash wrote and directed *Illusions* as a UCLA film school student in the 1980s, and it is still considered a pivotal example of how the Black independent film movement known as the L.A. Rebellion worked to deconstruct the oppressive structures of the United States' mainstream film industry. On the one hand, Mignon's quote may refer to the ways that filmmakers make films about themselves in a narrative or thematic sense - an autobiographical sense, if you will. On the other hand, perhaps it refers to the ways in which filmmakers bring traces of themselves, their vision and their style, to the screen. In this second instance, we might be inclined to toss around the word *auteur*. While these interpretations are somewhat different, they are also very similar. Both perspectives consider the filmmaker as an author of some sort. Indeed, whether through fiction or nonfiction (or a creative blending of the two), a filmmaker is first and foremost a storyteller. But the question still remains: Who gets to be the storyteller? Who are the selves behind the stories, and what stories do they tell?

In the context of the scene, Mignon's statement refers to the exclusionary practices of filmmaking, and the problems of representation that ultimately result. When Mignon speaks these words to Ester, she evokes a sense of dejection, as if her *own* "self" is excluded from this broad category of "selves." In a way, Mignon is suggesting that the people who make films, are, unfortunately, not people like her. They are not women. And they are certainly not Black women. And as a result, they are not making films that tell stories beyond the white and heteropatriarchal mainstream of Hollywood (Crey and Wuest); they are not stories that reflect authentic Black women's experiences. Rather, they are making films that propagate a white, heteropatriarchal 'norm,' which works to sideline minority groups within misrepresentative, stereotypical roles, or else pushes them towards the margins, rendering them narratively silent, and visually absent (Dash and hooks 39; Kapur 179).

However, what if we consider the context of the film itself, and the filmmaker behind it? What other meanings might Mignon's words take on? How does the phrase, "People make films about themselves," change when we acknowledge that now, there *is* a Black woman behind the words, the voice – behind the camera? I suggest that this is where the curious complexity of Mignon's line becomes crucial to our understanding of not only Dash's *Illusions* as a subversive commentary on classic Hollywood narrative filmmaking, but also of her enduring work as a Black feminist filmmaker who contributes to, and expands upon, a rich tradition of Black women's auto/biography.

(Absent) Subjects of the Screen

According to auteur critic Catherine Grant (2000), any writer about to delve into the terrain of *auteurism* inevitably faces a "queasy" moment (101; see also Ramanathan 3). While auteur theory has been, in a traditional sense, central to many discussions in film studies, it has become a site of contention in more recent analyses, particularly those that take a feminist approach (Grant, "Secret Agents" 114; Ramanathan 3; Smelik 29-31; Staiger 49). Feminists who dare to tackle the topic tend to self-consciously tiptoe around the threat of essentialism that comes with the assumption of an inherent (or at least historical) masculine *auteur*. Not wanting to adhere to or propagate the generalized and restrictive binaries of the feminine and masculine, I, myself, am not immune to this queasy query of the auteur. However, in the spirit of women's auto/biography, and life writing more broadly, it is important to consider and critically analyze those very moments of discomfort (Spry, *Body* 51). As such, I suggest that exploring and acknowledging the theoretical problems of the auteur might actually make way for alternative approaches to authorship in film (Ramanathan 1-3). In so doing, I aim to show how a feminist analysis of authorship in film, and the auteur more broadly, can open up ways of seeing the self in cinema, and specifically, in the filmmaking of Julie Dash.

Unlike traditional forms of creative production, such as writing, sculpting, or painting, identifying the singular "artist" behind filmmaking becomes a complicated, if not impossible, task. There are several roles that contribute to a film's narrative, including but not limited to: the director, the producer, the actors, and of course, the screenwriter. In the 1950s, film criticism became more interested in identifying the reigning artist, or author, behind the film (Gerstner 6-9; Grant, "Secret Agents" 113-4). While Alexandre

Astruc coined the term *caméra-stylo* (camera-pen), aligning filmmakers with the literary prestige of the "serious" writer, it was the word *auteur* that made a real mark on film theorists (Caughie 9; Gertsner 6; Sarris 36). Originally, *auteur* referred either to the author who wrote the script, or to the artist who, more broadly speaking, created the film (Caughie 9; Sarris 40). It is the latter perspective that won out, and the *auteur* eventually came to refer to "the artist whose personality was 'written' in the film" (Caughie 9; Sarris 43). Despite the collaborative nature of filmmaking, this 'personality' was most often associated with that of the film's director. Such notable film auteurs include Alfred Hitchcock, Orson Welles, Charlie Chaplin, and in more recent years, Paul Thomas Anderson, Wes Anderson, and Quentin Tarantino (Sarris 44). Although a director might not have directly authored a script, *auteur* perspectives identified the director as the primary visionary of a film and the director was thus "seen as the expression of his individual personality and as containing a meaningful coherence" (Smelik 29).

Interestingly, this reference to *his* personality is not just a gendered generalization of language. It brings to life Simone de Beauvoir's (1974) proclamation, "He is the Subject, he is the Absolute – she is the Other" (xix). Traditionally speaking, *auteur* theorists focused their attention primarily on male directors, to the point that one might wonder if a female director could even be included in this artistically elite category. This tradition is largely to do with *auteurism*'s roots in nineteenth-century art criticism, which valued an artist's individuality, originality, coherence, and wholeness above all (Smelik 29). According to Anneke Smelik (1998), "With its focus on the individual genius the concept of the film *auteur* is an implicitly masculine one" (30). These artistic ideals restricted the classification of 'genius' along gender, race, and class lines, thus creating

"an illusory idea that only the white, bourgeois male can be a true artist" (Smelik 30). Even today, the seemingly 'natural' conception of the *auteur* as a white male effectively excludes female authorship in cinema, all before she has the chance to make it to the director's chair. As such, *auteur* theory in general has become a rather provocative and problematic topic amongst feminist film theorists in particular.

Some film theorists are wary of alternating between the terms 'director' and 'author.' For example, Smelik warns film critics of confusing the collaborative art of filmmaking with more solitary, 'authored' work such as those created by literary writers (31; see also Davis, "Future of Black Film" 452). This is not to say that she wishes to dismiss critical analyses of authorship in film altogether, especially considering the feminist potential of doing so; rather, she prefers to use the term 'director' in place of 'author' to abate theoretical confusion. While Smelik makes a fair point, I would like to complicate this technical distinction a little more. For example, if we expand our notion of the *auteur* beyond the director of the film, we can open up new ways of conceiving authorship in film. In the case of *Illusions* and *Daughters of the Dust*, Julie Dash is not only the director, she is also the writer and producer for both. Of course, Dash is not the only director to take on multiple roles over the course of a film's production, but I think it is particularly important to consider her multiple roles if we are to reopen the question of authorship beyond the designation of 'director' and back again, to the 'author.' Not only does this allow us to consider authorship beyond the borders of film theory, it allows for a more complex exploration of the self in cinema, *beyond* the singular self of the director.

The popularity of *auteurism* peaked in late 1940s and the 1950s, particularly amongst French film theorists, but this theoretical trend began to wane with the rise of

poststructuralism. Film theory, largely following in the footsteps of literary theory, took a poststructuralist turn in the 1970s following Roland Barthes (1977) declaration over the "death of the author" (Barthes 148; see also Foucault 282). As he famously claimed, "the birth of the reader must be at the cost of the death of the Author" (Barthes 148; see also Smelik 30), suggesting that any worthy critical analyses must shift focus from the 'author' to the actual 'text.' As such, in the wake of the author's (and by association, the filmmaker's) figurative death, the reader (or spectator) came into the theoretical spotlight. For film studies in particular, the viewer – as interpreter of the film text – gained analytic traction, bringing ideas of subjectivity in both product (the film) and process (the interpretation of film) to the forefront of film theory.

It is curious, however, that this declaration of the "death of the author" came at the very moment when marginalized voices began to claim their authorial subjectivity (Smelik 31; see also Christian, "Race for Theory" 72; Staiger 49). During this poststructuralist period of the 1970s, feminists were beginning to draw more attention to the significance of female subjectivity, and in the filmmaking scene in particular, more and more women were working to tell their stories (Mulvey 10; Smelik 31). It would seem that just as women were claiming their positions of authorial power, poststructuralist film theory, following in Barthes footsteps, deemed it "*passé*" to consider theoretically the female author as subject (Gerstner 19; Smelik 30-31).

Further, as Pam Cook (1981) observes, with this poststructuralist "suppression of the 'personal'" comes a threat to the political significance of "self-expression" (272). Reflecting on the structuralist and Marxist rejection of *auteurist* ideals of 'self-expression', Cook argues for a return to the 'personal':

> Nevertheless, [self-expression] is a concept which, with its emphasis on the personal, the intimate, and the domestic, has always been important to the Women's Movement, and the personal diary form, for instance, has always been a means of self-expression for women to whom other avenues were closed. The suppression of the 'personal', albeit politically correct, brings to the surface specific problems and contradictions for women, and for feminist film-makers. (272)

Thus, Cook suggests that representing the "self" through art was becoming a *faux pas* of sorts, which essentially cordoned off what women (and marginalized women in particular) felt was a viable medium through which to creatively express and represent their experiences.

Film scholar Judith Mayne (1990) claims, "The notion of female authorship is not simply a useful political strategy; it is crucial to the reinvention of the cinema that has been undertaken by women filmmakers and feminist spectators" (97). Similarly, Janet Staiger (2003), while acknowledging the patriarchal problems of *auteurism*, nevertheless suggests that instead of shelving the topic altogether, feminists must reconsider what it means for female authorship, and for those in "nondominant situations" (49). To quote Nancy Hartsock (1987): "Why is it, exactly at the moment when so many of us who have been silenced begin to demand the right to name ourselves, to act as subjects rather than objects of history, that just then the concept of subjecthood becomes problematic?" (196) It is thus important to remember that "[w]ho is speaking does matter," as Staiger writes (27). Storytelling, as a form of self-reflection and self-expression, provides a means for those who have been historically underrepresented to validate the power of their voices, and to legitimize alternative avenues of non-normative life narratives. Here, alternative

modes of self-expression and storytelling come together as an act of survival and resistance in a way that expands the categories of self, author, and artist (Hill Collins 98-100). To deny access to authorship, and thus to deny the legitimacy of story, is to ignore the privilege that has historically dictated such narrative categories. After all, as Nancy K. Miller (1982) says of the power of authorship: "Only those who have it can play with not having not" (53; see also Staiger 49).

Feminist film theorist Laura Mulvey's "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema" (1975) has become one of the most cited pieces to come out of this feminist rise within film studies. Mulvey drew on concepts from psychoanalysis to highlight how the subliminal patriarchal structures of society have infiltrated the structures of film – aesthetically, thematically, and theoretically (6). While Mulvey's essay was highly influential to the development of a feminist film studies, it has also been critiqued for its lack of attention to issues of race in both film and feminism (hooks, *Black Looks* 122-3). In line with the second-wave feminism of the 1970s, Mulvey's theories of feminism and film called for the acknowledgement of women in filmmaking but did so without directly addressing the relationships between issues of race *and* gender. As a result, much of the canonical history chronicling this wave of film feminism, while highlighting the need for women filmmakers in general, ultimately overlooks the voices of women of colour. For example, although Dash was a film student at UCLA around the time of this movement towards female authorship, she and her Black female colleagues are not generally cited as leading figures in feminist filmmaking. As we will see with Dash's *Illusions*, it is this rewriting of film history through a more intersectional feminist lens that can help us expose the white heteropatriarchal influences upon both film and feminism.

Autobiographical Ancestors

If who is speaking does indeed matter, then I think it is important to reconsider the value (and potential pitfalls) of film authorship for Dash as a Black female filmmaker. While I have outlined so far the poststructuralist conditions from which Mignon's statement "people make films about themselves" may be interpreted, traditionally speaking, these conditions assumed the positioning of a white, male "I," as author/subject. That is, until this authorial "I" was no longer deemed fashionable in both literary and filmic realms, leaving women and other minority groups left without the theoretical credibility of claiming their own selves. As such, I would like to reexamine Mignon's words from a broader critical stance and open it up to the more multifaceted illusions of film, race, and what M. NourbeSe Philip terms "i-mages" (*Genealogy of Resistance* 43-4). A blending of "images" with the "I" suggests the intricate, and inescapable relationship between the screen and the self.

If authorship is concerned with the "self" at the heart of a story, what if we consider this 'self-in-story' more critically? How might autobiographical theory, or self-life-writing more broadly, help illuminate the significance of the self in Dash's filmmaking? Interestingly, Judylyn S. Ryan (2004) suggests that *Illusions* is an example of an autobiographical manifesto (1331-2). According to Sidonie Smith (1998), "through the manifesto, the autobiographical subject confronts the ghost of the identity assigned her by the old sovereign subject" (435). Furthermore,

> [T]he manifesto offers a point of departure for the current generation (of women, of people from the borderlands, of cyborgs) to resist a former generation imposing its multifarious technologies of identity. Through compelling myths and

> metaphors … manifestos map alternative futures for the "I" in the late twentieth century. (S. Smith, "Autobiographical Manifestos" 438-9)

Thus, the autobiography provides an opportunity for women in particular to move beyond the status as "Other," and (re)claim their own subjectivity (Beauvoir xix). However, while Ryan is adamant to declare *Illusions* an autobiographical manifesto, she is too quick to dismiss the overall "autobiographical" designation of *Illusions* (Ryan, "Outing" 1332). While it may not categorically fit the traditional parameters of autobiography, I would argue that it is more effective to approach *Illusions* as being indeed autobiograph*ical*. Following Perreault and Kadar's (2005) lead, the autobiographical makes space for the flexibility of genre, and the fluidity of our understanding of identity and representations of the 'self' (1-2). It is in the autobiograph*ical* that I believe we can view Dash's work as a valuable contribution to life writing that goes beyond the narrow, white European-based expectations of the genre.

Although Dash is not overtly present in her script, the story she tells is inextricably intertwined within the collective fabric of Black women's (auto)biography (Ryan, "Outing" 1332). Writing on the traditions of Black women autobiographers, Joanne Braxton (1989) suggests that Black American women are "born into a mystic sisterhood" who "live [their] lives within a magic circle, a realm of shared language, reference, allusion within the veil of our blackness and our femaleness" (1). By this she means that Black women writers do not adhere to the more traditional view of the author as a 'singular genius.' Rather, Black women autobiographers write not only about the "self" in isolation, but in relation to their family, their community, their ancestors – to "a larger communal body" (Stover 30; see also Prenshaw 444). Essentially, an

autobiography is collaborative by nature, continually informed and shaped by the countless lives of those women who live, have lived, and will live within this mystic sisterhood (Braxton 5-6; see also Stover 33).

Writing from this circular realm herself, Braxton claims, "We have been knowers, but we have not been known" (1). Interestingly this statement is reminiscent of Mignon's own revelation: "They see me, but they don't know who I am" (Dash, "Illusions" 211). According to Braxton, the formation of this mystic sisterhood is a result of Black women having been rendered "invisible to the dominant culture" throughout American history, making this unfortunate experience of exclusion and invisibility central to the "Afra-American experience" (Braxton 1). Thus, for Black women in particular, autobiographical writing has been a valuable literary space in which to share one's experiences of Black female subjectivity (Braxton 6-9; Easton 177; Etter-Lewis 125; see also Lorde, *Zami* xvi). As Braxton states, "For the black woman in American autobiography, the literary act has been, more often than not, an attempt to regain that sense of place in the New World" (2). Within this space, Black women have been able to tell stories of their selves and their communities, transgressing the private and public sphere, rightfully rendering the invisible, visible, and the knowers, known (Morrison, "Rootedness" 57).

However, this is not to say that classification as an "autobiographical writer" is necessarily comfortable for Black women. While self-life-writing has provided women in general with a valuable medium through which to assert the legitimacy and literacy of one's voice, the genre as a whole marks a particularly contentious history for Black Americans, both male and female. Much like discussions of auteurism and authorship, the

autobiographical genre has its roots in a tradition of white, European, male writing. Much like auteur theories, the embodiment of self through the "I" in autobiography relies on a "hegemonic, monadic 'I'" that Smith describes as "unabashedly 'white,' Eurocentric, colonizing in its deployment" (S. Smith, "Resisting the Gaze" 80; see also Stover 21). Additionally, Sidonie Smith (1987) suggests that envisioning this autobiographical "I" as the "essential self" propagates the idea that individuality and separateness is inherent to the self, ultimately ignoring the significance of connectedness which marks many women's autobiographical texts (*Poetics* 12); assuming a vision of "I" through a white, male-centered lens risks the projection of those values onto a universal self that does not really exist (Chinosole 156). Thus, just as film theory has conceptualized authorship and auteurism according to white heteropatriarchal traditions, so too does autobiographical theory tend to overlook the value of alternative perceptions, and representations, of the self. This Eurocentric conception of the self is therefore not necessarily applicable to autobiographical writing that falls outside of a white, male literary canon – a canon that promotes the illusory ideal of a singular artistic 'genius'.

Examples of Black women's life writings (see Brand *Map to the Door*; hooks *Belonging*; Lorde *Zami*; Philip *Genealogy of Resistance*) have often challenged the boundaries of traditional autobiography, understood by Philippe Lejeune (1989) as "retrospective prose narrative written by a real person concerning his own existence, where the focus is his individual life, in particular the story of his personality" (4). Having analyzed African-American women's personal letters, Gwendolyn Etter-Lewis (2000) espouses the benefits of expanding our definitions of autobiography beyond traditional notions of the genre that adhere to the singular personality required for

Lejeune's 'autobiographical pact' (107-8; Lejeune 22). With a more fluid understanding of the boundaries of this genre, she suggests we can move beyond European conceptions of self and genre that contribute to "the artificiality of canonical restraints," and then begin to acknowledge the various forms of women's life writing that may otherwise go unnoticed (Etter-Lewis 108). Considering the historical context of race and gender becomes crucial here. As Nellie Y. McKay (1998) writes:

> For twentieth-century black women identity is grounded in models of nineteenth-century black women who passed on to their generations the most vital lesson of their experiences: black womanhood was not static or a single ideal. The selves in the stories of the early foremothers reveal black female identity as a process of on-going invention of self under the pressures of race, class, and gender oppression. (McKay 100)

Similarly, Johnnie M. Stover (2003) points out that these European, male-centered autobiographical associations and assumptions meant that Black women autobiographers in particular were forced to cultivate a literary space in a "hostile arena" (21; see also Morrison, "Site of Memory" 68). This is perhaps best exemplified by the exclusionary practices of Lejeune's autobiographical pact, which requires the identity of the protagonist to be the same as that of the narrator (Lejeune 22). While the pinnacle of autobiographical truth was traditionally said to rely on the author's claim to an authentic first-person narration, this 'autobiographical pact' was not applied, historically speaking, to Black American writers (Stover 24). While the autobiographical pact was intended to encourage trust between author and reader on the "truth" of the text, the reality of its application throughout American history shows that the pact is based more on privilege

than on literary trust. According to Stover, for both male and female Black writers, an authenticating letter or statement from a white member of society, commending the "truth" of the narrative and the "good character" of the author, was required to accompany their autobiographical work (Stover 24; see also Gates 7-8; Morrison *Playing in the Dark* 50; Prince iii). In other words, the white reader was given more authority than the voice of a non-white writer (Stover 25). The autobiographical pact thus exists not solely as an authenticating measure, but an exclusionary, gatekeeping tool.

In light of this literary and cultural history, it becomes counterproductive to consider the autobiographical work of Black Americans, and particularly, women, solely through the lens of a genre rooted in these white male traditions. With a genre rooted in a history of racial exclusion, it is no wonder then that Black American women have chosen to write against the traditional parameters of white male autobiography. This is evident in Dash's *Illusions*. Although not an autobiography in the traditional sense of the genre – for example, it does not make claim to an 'autobiographical pact' – I would suggest that it can be understood within the spectrum of auto/biographical life writing. It is a fictional narrative, and the protagonist, Mignon Duprée, is not named after the writer, director, producer – or 'author' – of the film: Julie Dash. I would suggest, however, that it can be understood within the spectrum of auto/biographical life writing (Chapter 4 will turn this autobiographical lens onto Dash's feature film *Daughters of the Dust*). There are hints towards the autobiographical nature of her work, which I will discuss in the following pages. And while it is not my aim to merely assign autobiography as a convenient label, I do think it is useful to consider the significance of the film as autobiograph*ical*, in a way. As Ryan maintains, *Illusions* does not "fuse the identity" of Dash and Mignon – the 'real'

filmmaker and the 'fictional' filmmaker – but if we consider the parallels between the filmmakers, both inside and outside the narrative, we can learn more about the goals and values behind Dash's Black feminist filmmaking ("Outing" 1322).

Illusions of the (Cinematic) Self

While studies of Black women's autobiography tend to focus on written and oral literature, it is important to open up this discussion to other forms of storytelling. Bringing questions of the self and storytelling to the cinematic screen, Jacqueline Stewart (2015) takes up the issues of self-representation within the L.A. Rebellion movement (see also Chapter 2). While admitting that self-representation is not necessarily a defining characteristic of the movement, Stewart observes that there was indeed a tendency towards self-representation amongst L.A. Rebellion filmmakers (251). Whether these individuals showed up on the screen, or through narration – as fictional characters or as their "real" selves – Stewart suggests that "these appearances serve as illuminating moments of self-portraiture that evoke the myriad challenges that the L.A. Rebellion artists have faced in occupying the role of Black filmmaker" (251). Furthermore, these demonstrations of self-representation "subvert expectations of authenticity" (Field et al. 47) and instead present shadows of the self (Minh-ha, "Outside In" 137). This fragmented complexity of what Field et al. (2015) term "Black interiority" reveals the tensions of what it means to be a 'minority' artist representing a 'minority' group (47).

Stewart focuses her survey of self-representation on L.A. Rebellion filmmakers who are more or less, physically present in their work, including Charles Burnett, Haile Gerima, Barbara McCullough, Zeinabu irene Davis, among others (251). Because she

does not visibly present herself in her films, Dash is not discussed. However, if we consider the ways in which she is both metaphorically and physically present, in her writing and her directing, we can begin to broaden what it means to represent the self in cinema, and then work to situate Dash within alternative streams of film authorship and auto/biography.

While material conditions, such as training, equipment, and financing, were undeniable obstacles for members of the L.A. Rebellion, Stewart suggests that the "insider/outsider" status held by these non-white filmmakers marked the greatest obstacle towards self-representation (Stewart 251; Minh-ha, "Outside In" 137). Stewart compares the L.A. Rebellion filmmakers to Trinh T. Minh-ha's concept of the "Inappropriate Other" (Stewart 252; Minh-ha, "Outside In" 145). Inspired by Zora Neale Hurston's writings as an insider-anthropologist, Minh-ha developed the idea of "insider/outsider" to challenge anthropological trends surrounding representational practices of the 'Other' while applying these to contemporary representational practices in "third cinema" ("Outside In" 145; see also Hurston *Their Eyes Were Watching God*; Spivak 75). According to Minh-ha, once the insider takes on the role of outsider – in this case, through film – she is no longer solely an insider ("Outside In" 145). She suggests, however, that this insider-outsider – as filmmaker - rejects and refuses the totalizing and naturalizing of such subjective categories as "I" ("Outside In" 145, 147). As she writes:

> She refuses to reduce herself to an Other, and her reflections to a mere outsider's objective reasoning or insider's subjective feeling […] She knows she is different while being Him. Not quite the Same, not quite the Other, she stands in that

> undetermined threshold place where she constantly drifts in and out. ("Outside In" 145)

The Inappropriate Other thus works to unsettle the very meaning of what it means to be different, to be the same, ultimately "unsettling every definition of otherness" (Minh-ha, "Outside In" 145).

Much like Minh-ha's critique of traditional anthropological representations of the 'Other', Dash similarly tackles the question of the insider/outsider. In the opening scene of *Illusions*, Mignon's voiceover reads from Ralph Ellison's *Shadow and Act* (1964): "To direct an attack upon Hollywood would indeed be to confuse portrayal with action, the image with reality. In the beginning was not the shadow but the act, and the province of Hollywood is not action, but Illusion" (276; see also Dash, "Illusions" 196). In other words, to criticize Hollywood for the ills of its images, is to ignore the ills of society from which they stem. Reality here becomes the root of representation; if we wish to challenge the problems of the image, we must first consider the circumstances in which they were produced and that made them possible. However, this is not to say that representation is not also real. For example, like Ellison, Stuart Hall (1989) encourages us as spectators to view film "not as a second-order mirror held up to reflect what already exists, but as that form of representation which is able to constitute us as new kinds of subjects and thereby enable us to discover who we are" (80; see also hooks, *Black Looks* 131). Ellison is attempting to strip Hollywood of its manipulative veil; to challenge the myths of the movie making industry and to reinstate representation into the hands of individuals and communities who have been misrepresented and marginalized over the course of Hollywood's short, but powerful history.

Dash does well to unveil these illusions of cinema by effectively deconstructing sound and image. In one of *Illusions'* pivotal scenes, set in the studio's recording booth, Mignon attempts to salvage the audio-visual synchronization of a film gone awry in post-production by bringing in Ester Jeeter, a singer, to re-record the musical tracks. Mignon watches a playback of a musical scene, featuring a white actress and two male performers. Here, the audio and visual tracks appear fine as the actress lip syncs to an Ella Fitzgerald tune. However, the juxtaposition of this blond starlet projecting the sound of Fitzgerald helps set up questions of race, representation, and the illusions of Hollywood. In the next scene playback, Mignon sees the same actress performing another song, but this time, her lip syncing does not match with the audio track. This is where Ester steps in to dub over the malfunctioning scene. As she performs, Mignon stands in the studio booth, watching Ester through a glass barrier, while her white male colleagues make casual racist remarks, hinting at the stereotypical Black roles that viewers might be more familiar with in Hollywood films. (While it might take place in a fictional version of 1942, these kinds of comments are eerily familiar to contemporary 'realities'). In a way, Ester is both present and absent – inside and outside. Her voice fills the room, but the projection of her voice through the image of a white woman on the screen, renders her invisible within the finished product (V. Smith 54). Indeed, Dash's choice to use Ella Fitzgerald's singing voice for Ester reveals her own role in the "construction and production of black women's identity" (V. Smith 55). Valerie Smith (1998) writes, "Problematizing her own position, she reminds us that her film is no more 'real' than the one on which Mignon works" (55). Not unlike the classic film, *Singin' in the Rain* (1952), *Illusions* helps expose the constructedness of cinema by deconstructing the powerful

relationship between sound and image. However, unlike the 1952 musical, *Illusions* reveals not only the absurdity and arbitrariness of celebrity and cinema, but the racist foundations upon which they are built.

Even in the context of Dash's directorial decision, the framing of this scene helps demonstrate the precarity of the insider-outsider. At one point in the sequence, we see Ester to the left of the screen, singing into a microphone as a larger projection of the actress being dubbed features in the top right side of the screen. In the bottom left corner, we see a distorted reflection of one of the male sound engineers. For Mignon, the protagonist of the film, and the producing assistant of this 'film-within-a-film,' we see the complex layers of race, representation, and identity – or better yet, the illusions of the cinematic self. Ester's barrier to seeing herself on the screen – or to the "i-mage," as M. NourbeSe Philip might describe it (*Genealogy of Resistance* 43-9) – despite her talent and passion, is reflective of Mignon's own experience as a Black woman passing as white. The glass barrier between Mignon and Ester becomes both transparent and reflective – a portal and a mirror. Through the glass, Mignon sees Ester, but at the same time, it might be argued that she also sees herself. Like Minh-ha's insider-outsider, Mignon has, in her own words, "become an illusion, just like the stories they make here. They think of me one way, yet I'm another" (Dash, "Illusions" 211).

Continuing the tradition of Black and diasporic women writers who emphasize the ambiguity and fluidity of 'self,' Mignon embodies an identity *in-between* (Anzaldúa 99-101; Barvosa 91). She is an insider-outsider, a sister-outsider (see Lorde *Sister Outsider*) – a self that resists simplified classifications, but instead emphasizes connection and community (Willett et al., "Feminist Perspectives"). It is through the 'other' that Mignon

comes to identify her own *self*. As Hélène Cixous (1997) writes, "The other in all his or her forms gives me *I*. It is on the occasion of the other that *I* catch sight of *me*; or that *I* catch *me* at: reacting, choosing, refusing, accepting. It is the other who makes my portrait" (Cixous and Calle-Gruber 13; emphasis in original). Following W.E.B. Du Bois' account of "double-consciousness" (*Souls of Black Folk* 3), both Ester and Mignon face, as Stewart describes it, "the Black psychic predicament of always seeing oneself through the lens of a contemptuous white society" (Stewart 259; see also Brand, *Map to the Door* 49-51; Hill Collins, 99-100). As Mignon gazes through the glass barrier, she sees (and hears) Ester, but at the same time, she is surrounded by images that reflect the white lens of Hollywood, and American society more broadly: that of the white actress, passively yet powerfully claiming Ester's voice as her own, and the white sound engineer whose reflection intrudes upon the frame, casting a ghostly mark on the very glass barrier through which Mignon looks. The sound engineer's reflection distorts the image much like his earlier racist remarks attempted to reframe Mignons' own perception of Ester. Much like Cixous, Mignon is caught in a moment of recognition between the illusory "I" and the reflective Other – recognizing, reacting, refusing (Cixous and Calle-Gruber 13). Dash's construction of the recording booth scene thus works to deconstruct the illusions of cinema by effectively *exposing* the construction of film sound and image (Stewart 259). In the process, she demonstrates a resistance to, and refusal of, the "categorical and totalizing" treatments of Black subjects throughout history, in Hollywood and beyond (Renov qtd. in Stewart 258).

Stewart acknowledges that expressions of self-representation vary tremendously between L.A. Rebellion filmmakers, but even when their presence is more "self-reflective

than self-reflexive" – as we have seen with Dash's filmmaking – they all work to "expose rather than collapse the complex relationships between Black authors, their subjects, and their chosen media" (Stewart 252-3). In other words, self-representation in the L.A. Rebellion era challenges traditional notions of what exactly constitutes a "self," and how it could possibly be represented. In many of these cases, much like Black women autobiographers, as discussed earlier, the self exists not in isolation, but through artistic collaboration – through other selves, through history, and through creative expression. In the case of the L.A. Rebellion filmmakers, whether they present themselves through fiction, biography, or another performative medium, each act of self-representation shows how, as "the Inappropriate Other," they are unable to speak of their community "without speaking of [themselves], of history without involving [their] story" (Minh-ha "Not You/Like You"; see also Minh-ha, "Outside In" 147-8; Stewart 251). In other words, there is an ongoing representational conflict of subjectivity, caught in the crossroads between self and subject, between story and history, and between insider and outsider.

Outing the (Inappropriate) Other

Reflecting the spirit of Black women's autobiographical traditions, Judylyn S. Ryan (2004) argues that outing the self – or naming the self – "is an important act of self-definition and self-empowerment for Black women artists" (1328). As an act of resistance against the assumed institutional white ideology, Black women in particular have made an effort to regain control of their image – to tell stories and represent their *selves* in a way that reflects the diversity of their experiences despite their positioning within the "triple bind" (Minh-ha, *Woman, Native, Other* 6). They were to define themselves – and

to be defined – not in relation to an assumed white ideological standard, but as artists in their own right. For many Black female artists in the U.S., filmmaking provides a venue through which to (re)story their selves and their communities, allowing them to ultimately (re)claim their own feminist subjectivities (Larkin 158).

In discussion of Dash's *Illusions*, Ryan (2004) claims, "No other Black woman's film offers as insightful and expansive a view of the political vision informing Black feminist filmmaking" (1320). However, while some theorists have been critical of the film's use of racial 'passing' as a trope akin to those often found in classic Hollywood films – perhaps most notably being *Pinky* (1949) and *Imitation of Life* (1959 [Dir. Douglas Sirk]; 1934 [Dir. John M. Stahl]) – Ryan encourages critics to think about Dash's use of passing beyond the surface level interpretation of stereotype. At the heart of Ryan's argument here is her identification of the relationship between Mignon as fictional protagonist, and Dash as filmmaker. She is suggesting that with Mignon's 'outing' as a Black woman, after 'passing' as a white woman, Dash is symbolically 'outing' herself as a Black feminist filmmaker ("Outing" 1321). For example, the conversation Mignon has with Ester near the end of the film, on the obstacles faced by Black women in the motion picture industry, allows her to reconsider "the self-censorship imposed by her own masked identity" (Ryan, "Outing" 1322). Just after this scene, Lieutenant Bedsford, who works at the studio as a consultant and had been making unwelcome advances on Mignon, finds a picture of Mignon's boyfriend, a Black soldier, and confronts her about her 'true identity.' Realizing what Bedsford is trying to do, Mignon confidently declares, "I'm not ashamed of who I am" (Dash, "Illusions" 211). With her Black identity now 'unmasked,' Mignon takes the opportunity to address the racism in Hollywood – and

broader U.S. society – and to (re)assert her position within the Hollywood film industry. According to Ryan, this powerful ending effectively "discloses the 'autobiographical' design in *Illusions* when Mignon, ventriloquizing Dash, proclaims her new determination to 'use the power of the motion picture' for the advancement of those who have been 'othered' by mainstream productions" ("Outing" 1322). I would also add that this autobiographical design of Mignon's self-outing is concerned not so much with the singular self, characteristic of a more traditional autobiography, but rather with a more auto/biographical understanding of the self as connected to a community – and specifically, a community of many other talented Black women filmmakers (Dash, "Making *Daughters*" 26). Mignon aims to use her position in Hollywood for the betterment of others; she will use her power as a filmmaker to change the industry from within, working to (re)envision and (re)shape the stories and images being represented on screens across the country (and perhaps, even beyond).

While it may be a typical Hollywood trope, Dash's portrayal of passing works beyond the stereotype. Traditionally, American films tend to use passing to represent a desire to escape the social, economic, and political limitations faced by racial minorities, and specifically, the experience of 'Blackness' (Gaines *Fire & Desire* 158-60; Larkin 160; Ryan, "Outing" 1324-5; V. Smith 35-6). Valerie Smith (1998) suggests that the traditional portrayal of this trope implies "passing as betrayal, blackness as self-denial, whiteness as comfort" (36). As noted previously, *Illusions*, has been critiqued for engaging with this particular trope of passing (Hartman and Griffin 371). For example, Saidiya Hartman and Farah Griffin (1991) claim that the climax of the film occurs when Bedsford attempts to 'out' Mignon. Critiquing what this means for the feminist authority

of Dash's film, they write: "The film inadvertently reaffirms the power of the racist gaze insofar as the dramatic climax turns on Mignon's unveiling" (Hartman and Griffin 368-9). However, Valerie Smith suggests that with the complex intersectionality of race and gender in the film, Dash rejects the tradition of the trope, and instead constructs "passing as a potentially subversive activity" (36).

This particular scene marks the beginning of the end of the film. Bedsford goes out of his way to 'out' Mignon, partly as a racist defense mechanism after realizing he was inadvertently courting a Black woman, and partly as a ploy to keep her from succeeding in the industry. For Bedsford, Mignon does not belong in his white world – romantically, artistically, or economically. His outing of Mignon is undeniably a turning point in the film, but to consider this point the climax places the power in Bedsford's words and thus ignores Mignon's own agency. While Hartman and Griffin make important points on the film in general, I agree with Ryan when she suggests that the climax of the film is not Bedsford's exposure of Mignon as a Black woman, but actually Mignon's "outing of herself" ("Outing" 1325). When Bedsford finally confronts Mignon, he intends to shame her for her true identity and prevent her from working her way up in the studio. However, it is Mignon who ultimately claims her own 'outing.' As Ryan points out, the film does not dwell on Bedsford's exposure ("Outing" 1325). Valerie Smith similarly suggests that the "anticlimactic nature" of Bedsford's plan highlights Dash's "revisionist approach" to the passing trope (52). Unlike the passing narrative of the "mulatto" typically portrayed in Hollywood films, which would see punishment following the exposure of a character's identity, Mignon faces no drawbacks or penalties from the event (Gaines, *Fire & Desire* 159; V. Smith 52-3). In fact, Mignon takes control

of the conversation by giving a powerful speech on race and representation. In a way, while Bedsford's exposure of her identity marks a significant turning point in the narrative, I would suggest that Mignon's outing of Hollywood's racism, and the exposure of the "constructedness" of cinema itself (V. Smith 53), is a more accurate and effective way to frame the climax of the film.

Additionally, while Bedsford is the first white character in the film to uncover Mignon's identity, it is significant to note that Mignon has already been 'outed' to the audience at this point (Ryan, "Outing" 1325). Not only does Ester recognize Mignon's racial identity before Bedsford does, but Dash actually gives Mignon a chance to verbally 'out' herself before anyone else in the film. This self-outing becomes a form a resistance, as it returns the power to name one's 'self' to Mignon, rather than allowing the oppressor to first identify her as 'Other'. In a scene following Ester's re-recording session, Mignon calls her mother from a phone booth. Inspired by Ester's performance and discouraged by the politics of representation as witnessed in the sound recording booth, she turns to her mother for solace, saying, "I just wanted to hear your voice" (Dash, "Illusions" 205). While we do not hear Mignon's mother, we can infer from Mignon's responses that she is asking whether or not her colleagues have recognized her as a Black woman. For example, Mignon responds after a pause, "No, they never did, and I just didn't happen to mention it, either" (Dash, "Illusions" 205). She follows this with a confession that she had hoped things would change after the war but is beginning to doubt whether Hollywood would begin to reflect the realities of American society and culture. In a poignant moment in this scene, she tells her mother, "I want to be a part of that change," adding, "if it

doesn't happen here first in this industry, then I don't think it will happen it all ..." (Dash, "Illusions" 206).

Central to understanding this scene is the role of the telephone. According to Hamid Naficy (2001), "telephonic contact has a 'near but far' character. It can be as intense as face-to-face interaction, and it can create a 'psychological neighborhood' for people who are scattered over a wide area" (132). Cixous (1997) also suggests that telephones have a particular significance to diasporic and transnational identities. Much like Mignon as an insider-outsider, the telephone is "the far in the near. The outside in the inside" (Cixous and Calle-Gruber 49). Therefore, when she speaks to her mother on the phone after seeing Ester (and by association, her 'true' self) in the recording booth, we can gather that she is seeking familial connection; to find the voice "at the most ancient layer" (Cixous and Calle-Gruber 49). As Hartman and Griffin write, "Esther's [sic] song guides Mignon's return to the maternal body, her desire for grounding and for home" (367). The telephone cord becomes a kind of umbilical cord – a connection between mother and child; something that "cannot be closer, cannot be farther" (Cixous and Calle-Gruber 49). This hearkens back to traditions in Black women's literature, both written and oral. As Toni Morrison writes, "it is if we don't keep in touch with the ancestor that we are, in fact, lost" ("Rootedness" 63). With this in view, Mignon's seemingly magnetic draw to the phone booth after seeing Ester perform represents Mignon's desire for, and connection to, her ancestral roots.

Here, we can also see a relationship between notions of 'outing' and 'closeting.' The phone booth acts as a kind of closet, a public, yet private space where Mignon feels comfortable expressing her true self. She thus 'outs' herself to her chosen audience on her

own terms, while also situating herself – through the telephone – within the figurative space of maternal connection and community. Traditionally, notions of outing and closeting are associated with queer identities (see Butler, *Gender Trouble* xiii; hooks, *Talking Back* 121); however, as Ryan points out, these terms can also apply to a wider array of "subaltern subjectivities" ("Outing" 1326). In the case of sexuality, the 'preferred' option would assume a heterosexual identity, meaning any individual that identifies outside of that category would exist, *a priori*, in the closet. This is complicated, however, when we explore the relationship between race and closeting. For example, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick claims, "Racism ... is based on a stigma that is visible in all but exceptional cases" (75). On the experience of being Black in the Diaspora, Dionne Brand writes, "To live at the Door of No Return is to live self-consciously. To be always aware of your presence as a presence outside of yourself. And to have 'others' constantly remark on your presence as outside of itself" (*Map to the Door* 49-50). In other words, to be Black in the Diaspora is to simultaneously navigate the experiences of self and the construction of self as 'Other.' While sexual identities are largely considered invisible, and thus more compatible to theories of closeting, passing, and outing, race is considered a more transparent, 'visible' identity category, one that precludes the *a priori* assumption of closeting.

However, Dash's use of Mignon as a Black woman able to pass for white shows that race is not always visibly explicit – Mignon embodies the 'exception' to the stigma of race being universally visible. Here, the idea that race is not applicable to closeting ignores the diversity and subjectivity of racial experiences. In line with this, Ryan argues that racism does indeed induce a form of closeting ("Outing" 1326). For example, she

cites how many racial minorities admitted to "ideologically White" institutions (in which we could include Hollywood) are expected to conform to the goals and ideals of their more traditional members and make no attempt to resist or challenge these institutional agendas ("Outing" 1326-7; see also Larkin 167). This would suggest that racial minorities are automatically closeted upon admittance on the *a priori* assumption that they will adhere to the institution's values and tradition of "whiteness as ideology" (Morrison, "Unspeakable Things" 16; see also Morrison, *Playing in the Dark* 47; Ryan, "Outing" 1327).

Interestingly, it is only when Mignon encounters Ester – another Black woman who recognizes her 'true' identity – that she decides to (re)claim her 'self' without fear. As Mignon says near the end of the film, it was Ester who awakened her consciousness, in a way, encouraging her, "to define what I had already come to know and to take action without fearing." Ryan aptly points out that this scene demonstrates the tremendous benefit – and indeed, the necessity – of having colleagues that support your vision and aspirations ("Outing" 1330). Similarly, Kevin Everod Quashie (2004) suggests that it is through Black women's friendships, or what he describes as the "idiom" of "the girlfriend" where "the self becomes and is undone, the site where the politics of self, nation, and difference are evaluated through cultural landscapes and ethical sensibilities relevant to Black women, where the necessary anti-identity politics coalesce" (Quashie 1). The relationships between women are thus crucial to Black female subjecthood and self-definition. Indeed, it was only after Mignon had a heartful conversation with Ester, a conversation that touched on the very issues of race, gender, and representation that had been otherwise swept under the rug by her white colleagues, that she felt she could

exhibit the agency that Hollywood would have her believe did not exist for Black American women. I believe that this relationship between Mignon and Ester is crucial to our understanding of Dash's narrative beyond the terms of 'passing'. While Ester helped Mignon (and perhaps also Dash) on her journey to 'outing the self' as a Black feminist filmmaker (Ryan, "Outing" 1328), I believe their friendship - a story of "girlfriend subjectivity" (Quashie 1-2) – requires closer analysis.

Singing that Sad Song: The Safe Spaces of Sisterhood

Much of the discourse surrounding *Illusions* focuses on the role of the 'passing trope,' however, I would like to suggest another way of approaching Dash's narrative. I believe that crucial to our understanding of Dash's work is putting it in conversation with other Black women writers and artists (a theoretical, textual "safe space"). While I agree with critical theorists such as Ryan and Smith who analyze the passing narrative in *Illusions* as a subversive act – a way of interrogating the damaging portrayals of the traditional 'tragic mulatto' stereotype – I wonder what more we can learn from Dash's work by looking beyond the traditional parameters of classic literature and film, and instead to the broader areas of Black arts. Although we cannot ignore the historical and cultural context of the mainstream 'passing narrative', we must also consider how Dash's work relates to other Black women's writings, theories, and art, rather than just the stereotypes portrayed in classic Hollywood film – the cinematic space that Dash is actively working outside of.

Much like Quashie's notion of the "girlfriend" (1), Patricia Hill Collins (2000) similarly stresses the importance of "safe spaces" for Black women. These safe spaces, such as families, churches, and Black American community groups, are locations – both

spatially and socially – where Black women can speak and express themselves freely (Hill Collins 100). Hill Collins suggests that these safe spaces are necessary for Black women's self-definition, as well as their resistance to dominant ideologies (99-101). One particularly important safe space is the relationships between Black women, including private relationships between family and friends, as well as the more formal relationships formed through organizations and community involvement (Hill Collins 102). This is the kind of safe space that Dash emphasizes through the conversation between Ester and Mignon.

Although the interaction between Mignon and Ester initially occurs on business matters – Mignon requires Ester to sign several release forms – once they begin talking, they quickly strike up a friendship. Dash's screenplay notes that, when Ester speaks candidly about the recording session, Mignon is "touched by Ester's lack of pretentiousness" (Dash, "Illusions" 208). Ester says to Mignon, "[My agent] told me what you managed to do for me in there […] Sometimes this can be a rotten business. It's good to have someone on the inside pulling for you […] At least they're giving us a chance" (Dash, "Illusions" 208). This subtle placement of "us" shows that Ester not only recognizes Mignon's identity, but also identifies *with* her as a fellow Black woman finding her way in the movie business. Later in this scene, Ester asks Mignon, "Do you pretend when you're with them, or can you just be yourself?" (Dash, "Illusions" 209) After noticing Mignon look nervously at her white coworkers across the room, Ester adds, "Oh, don't worry … they can't tell like we can" (Dash, "Illusions" 209). Looking more comfortable with her surroundings, and with herself, Mignon says, "No they can't, can they?" (Dash, "Illusions" 209). This exchange between Mignon and Ester confirms

the legitimacy of "safe spaces" and the power of "girlfriend subjectivity" upon self-definition (Hill Collins 102; Quashie 1). As Hill Collins writes, "In the comfort of daily conversations, through serious conversations and humor, African-American women as sisters and friends affirm one another's humanity, specialness, and right to exist" (102). It is only after her interaction with Ester that Mignon decides to more openly 'out' herself, and to (re)claim her identity as a Black woman. Through friendly conversation, Ester and Mignon create a safe space in which they can both speak freely and cultivate a consciousness of selfhood.

Another important safe space for Black women, according to Hill Collins, is music. Specifically, she discusses the blues tradition as essential to Black American music (105). In her words, "blues assumes a similar function in African-American oral culture to that played by print media for White, visually based culture. Blues was not just entertainment – it was a way of solidifying community and commenting on the social fabric of working-class Black life in America" (105). Indeed, Clyde Taylor (1983) highlights the relationship between blues music – and Black music more broadly – on the Black independent film movement of the 1960s and 1970s (see also James 157; Woolsey 177). In fact, he states that in his interview with these Black filmmakers, "roughly three-fourths of them stressed black music as a formative and fundamental reference for their art" ("New U.S. Black Cinema"). Specifically, he identifies blues music as being a valuable frame through which to approach and understand the complexities of Black American films. Although the song Ester sings in *Illusions* is jazz (through the voice of Ella Fitzgerald) and not traditional blues, it still exists within the realm of Black music. As well, Dash has demonstrated that she is not particularly interested in separating Black

music by genre. For example, in her script for *Daughters of the Dust*, she includes a note – "field cries=blues=jazz" – which equates the "field cries" of Gullah families to both blues and jazz (Dash, "Script" 80). These cries, like blues and jazz, offer a sense of tradition, or as Dash writes, "A tradition of lost souls calling out to identify a half-remembered, half-forgotten 'people' they were taken from" (Dash, "Script" 80). Therefore, I believe viewing *Illusions* through the lens of this musical tradition, and more broadly, the lens of Black American oral culture, we can begin to understand more fully the role of passing in Dash's work beyond the terms of the trope.

Hill Collins approaches the blues as a text, pointing out that the journey of self-definition has been central to Black women's music (112; see also C. Tate 208-9). She writes, "The assertion of the self usually comes at the end of a song, after the description or analysis of the troublesome situation. This affirmation of self is often the only solution to that problem or situation" (Hill Collins 112). Hill Collins gives the example of Nina Simone's 1966 blues song "Four Women," to highlight this journey of the self. Interestingly, Julie Dash directed, wrote, and edited a short film called *Four Women* in 1975. Filmed about a decade after the original release of the song, Dash's short, experimental film – or "choreopoem" ("Artmakers") – puts dance to Simone's haunting ballad. The sole performer in the short film is dancer Linda Martina Young who embodies the four women described in Simone's song, who in turn, represent common stereotypes of Black women in America: Aunt Sarah is the strong, resilient woman who rises above the emotional and physical pain of being Black in America; Saffronia is the 'tragic mulatto,' a 'victim' of biracial inheritance who exists in the in-between; Sweet Thing is a sex worker who uses the economic exchanges of her work to mediate the

boundaries between Black and white; Peaches, the fourth woman, stands out as particularly powerful because of the fact that, as Hill Collins claims, "[she] is angry" (113). Peaches, a tough, militant woman, is aware of the legacies of slavery in contemporary America, singing: "I'm awfully bitter these days / Because my parents were slaves." While the first three women portray the stereotypes of Black women, Peaches represents the resistance against these controlling images. As Collins suggests, her journey through social awareness and self-definition brews anger, but it is "an anger that leads to action" (113).

By pairing dance with Simone's music, Dash's experimental film also offers us new ways to think about Black female subjectivity and Black female spectatorship (hooks, *Black Looks* 131). When thinking of films, it is all too easy to think of looking relations as one-directional: the subject is *looked at* by the spectator. However, when we speak of an "oppositional gaze," bell hooks encourages us to explore the relationship between image and spectator even more closely (hooks, *Black Looks* 116, 122). While the Black female spectator looks to the screen, how does the screen then look, in a way, back upon the viewer? What kinds of representations exist for the Black female spectator? In the case of Dash's *Four Women*, we take these looking relations one step further. By having one dancer embody all four women, Dash replaces stereotype with subjectivity while drawing attention to the constructedness of the screen; in classic narrative film, it is all too easy to get swept away by linear narratives and seamless editing, but through this experimental performance, we become more aware of the relationship between viewer and subject (Taylor, "Future of Black Film" 457). The dancer performs on a stage, a place that exists for the purpose of performance. Much like *Illusions'* recording booth scene,

Four Women asks viewers to confront their own relationship with the performance; to consider more closely their role as spectator and thus, interpreter of images of Black femininity. As the four women ponder at the end of their respective verses, "What do they call me?" we, as spectators/listeners, are asked to consider our own relationship to Aunt Sarah, Saffronia, Sweet Thing, and Peaches. Though each woman speaks for herself, we see how their perceptions of self are intertwined with how other people see them. In a way, the viewer/spectator becomes implicated in the process of stereotyping and are called to question their own role in racial representation through critical looking relations.

Like *Four Women*, *Illusions* draws attention to "the dynamics of spectatorship" (Griffin and Hartman 372), not only between film subject and spectator, but between Black women in general. And for Dash, the act of listening is essential to this relationship. According to Audre Lorde, the journey of self for Black women can be traced through "the transformation of silence into language and action" (Lorde, *Sister Outsider* 40; Hill Collins 113). Elaborating on this, Hill Collins writes:

> One can write for a nameless, faceless audience, but the act of using one's voice requires a listener and thus establishes a connection. For African-American women the listener most able to pierce the invisibility created by Black women's objectification is another Black woman. This process of trusting one another can seem dangerous because only Black women know what it means to be Black women. But if we will not listen to one another, then who will? (Hill Collins 104)

In the case of Mignon and Ester, we see that it is not just about 'looking relations' but also 'listening relations.' First, we have Ester singing for a white actress in the recording booth, which Mignon listens to intently, eventually inspiring her to reconnect with her

mother and reexamine her role in the film industry. Then, we have Ester and Mignon talking to each other after the recording session – confiding in one another about work, life, worries, and joys. Although Ester does not sing traditional blues in the recording booth, she later hints at the genre's themes while reflecting on her own experience as a moviegoer:

> Sometimes, when I'm in a movie theatre, … I sit and listen to my voice coming from one of those movie stars … I just close my eyes and pretend that it's me up there, wearing that satin gown, in that funny situation … cause I know how to sing that sad song. (Dash, "Illusions" 209; ellipses in original)

Here, we see the relationship between music and movies in both a narrative and thematic sense. Like music, movies have an audience – a listener. And like "Four Women," one of those 'sad songs' that inspired Dash herself to make a film, it becomes important to look at *Illusions* through the broader traditions of Black women's resistance and self-definition, such as blues music. In doing so, we can see how Mignon's passing is not a matter of right or wrong, truth or deceit, rather it is a representation of identity as a journey, as fluid – as a range of experiences and expressions across self and other (Hill Collins 99).

Hill Collin's writes, "Traditionally, when taken together, Black women's relationships with one another, the Black women's blues tradition, and the work of Black women writers provided the context for crafting alternatives to prevailing images of Black womanhood" (111). From these safe spaces, women could explore new ideas and craft their own tools to "resist the controlling images of Black womanhood" as 'Other' (Hill Collins 112). They reject the master's tools and resist the master's images through

their own representations of selfhood. In other words, Black women's resistance through self-definition and self-expression is actually crucial to social change, as well as to survival (Hill Collins 112). For Mignon, passing as white was a part of her survival in the film industry, but her relationship with Ester helped her realize that survival of the self involves moving *beyond* the singular self. The self is not the isolated, separated self of 'Western' philosophies. Rather, the self is defined through relationships with others, in the context of family and community (Hill Collins 113). And just as a blues singer's self-affirmation usually comes at the end of a song, so too, does Mignon (re)claim the self at the end of the film (Hill Collins 112). Not only her individual "self" as a Black female filmmaker – as Ryan puts forth – but also the "larger self" as connected to other Black women, near and far (Sanchez qtd. in Hill Collins 113). "By being accountable to others, African American women develop more fully human, less objectified selves," Hill Collins claims, adding that "[r]ather than defining the self in opposition to others, the connectedness among individuals provides Black women deeper, more meaningful self-definitions" (133). Similar to Hill Collins, Joanne Braxton likens the blues tradition to Black women's autobiography. She claims, "like the blues singer, the autobiographer incorporates communal values into the performance of the autobiographical act, sometimes rising to function as the 'point of consciousness' of her people" (Braxton 5). As Mignon declares in the final voiceover: "We would meet again, Ester Jeeter and I … for it was she who helped me see beyond the shadows dancing on a white wall … to define what I had already come to know, and to take action without fearing" (Dash, "Illusions" 212; ellipses in original).

With this, we can see how the outing of Mignon's 'true identity' was not founded on the need for 'truth' – as traditional passing narratives seem to focus on – but instead on the importance of identity and self-definition. For Dash, *Illusions* is not merely about *passing* in a white world, but about *living* as a Black woman. Mignon represents not the (blurred) dichotomy between Black and white, but instead the journey of Black women's self-definitions. In Hill Collins words, "Identity is not the goal but rather the point of departure in the process of self-definition" (113-114). Indeed, it is when Mignon speaks to Ester about how "people make films about themselves" that she finally voices her discomfort with passing in the film industry. She says:

> People make films about themselves. What they want, what they love, what they fear most … here, we're just props in their stories. Musical props, dancing props, comical relief. There's nothing here for me anymore … I came into this world of moving shadows and I made it work for me … but I made what work? There's no joy in the seduction of false images. (Dash, "Illusions" 210; ellipses in original)

Through her connection with Ester, Mignon is able to realize the illusion of cinema's controlling images. Her emphasis on the "I" and "me" suggests that, up until this point, Mignon had been "plotting out her destiny in isolation" (C. Tate xxi). But after her conversation with Ester, she realizes why, despite her achievements, her work had not been fulfilling for her. Just as there is "no joy in the seduction of false images," without the "we" there is no joy in the "I," and there can be no real social change without the relationships that nurture self-revelation (Lorde, *Sister Outsider* 42; Hill Collins 104; Quintanales 146-7; Spry, *Autoethnography* 83). As Alexis DeVeaux says, in conversation with Claudia Tate:

> I see a greater and greater commitment among black women writers to understand self, multiplied in terms of the community, the community multiplied in terms of the nation, and the nation multiplied in terms of the world. You have to understand what your place as an individual is and the place of the person who is close to you […] before you can explore more complex or larger groups. (qtd. in C. Tate 55)

Although Mignon is not working within an institutional space that values her voice, she is able to achieve self-definition and self-valuation through the safe space of friendship – from Ester, to her mother, to the broader community of Black women.

Beyond the Veil

While the safe spaces of friendship, family, and music are crucial to Mignon's journey, the Hollywood setting reminds viewers of the complexity of being a Black woman working within the "master's house" (Lorde, *Sister Outsider* 112; Hill Collins 117). Despite her entrance into the ideologically white institute of Hollywood, for Mignon, achieving studio executive status certainly comes with strings attached. While she was indeed passing as white, it is still indicated in the film that working as a woman in this industry was a feat in itself. For example, Mignon must continually dodge unwanted advances and sexist remarks from Bedsford, and perhaps most significantly, she is not given the opportunity to produce the kinds of films she herself wishes to see on the screen. Here, Dash's use of passing helps shine a light on the seemingly inherent sexist structure of the film industry. At the same time, Mignon's passing allows us to see how the closeting structure of race operates on *a priori* assumptions. Dash, as writer and

director, is showing us not only the issues of gender, but the intersections of race, gender, and class that form an intricate web. With Mignon passing as (and thus, assumed to be) white, we get an 'insider' look at how Hollywood narratives are constructed and confined to a white ideology. The predominance of whiteness at National Studios (perhaps Dash's synecdoche for Hollywood), through the people working and the films being produced, shows how "power is always coded as 'white'" (Crey and Wuest). Like Minh-ha's insider/outsider, we are able to see how the stories of Others are not the stories Hollywood wants to tell.

Take for example the first scene in the film where we are introduced to Mignon. Before we even see her, the camera focuses on a telegram in her hand from the U.S. Office of War Information titled: "American Indians Outwit Enemies." This telegram states that 'Indians' in the U.S. Armed Forces are using their Navajo language to deliver and receive messages in a code that enemies are unable to crack. The camera cuts to reveal Mignon, as she finishes reading the telegram. Interestingly, Dash's script makes it clear that when we first see Mignon on screen, "we see only the double-V designed black and white suit that she is wearing" (Dash, "Illusions" 196). After she reads the telegram, the camera pans to reveal her face, covered – and with noir-like shadows – by an asymmetrical veil. Phyllis Rauch Klotman examines the significance of Mignon's suit, recognizing the double "V" design as the official NAACP symbol which, for Black Americans, "meant victory over racism at home as well as victory abroad" (Klotman 194; see also V. Smith 52). Additionally, the veil is a common marker for the "mulatto" character in film and literature; it not only features famously as a powerful metaphor for racial denigration and passing in Du Bois' writing (*Souls of Black Folk* 3; see also

Bartling 126; Braxton 1; Klotman 194; V. Smith 52), but also in earlier works by Dash which challenge and resist the "tragic mulatto" stereotype (for example, in her short film *Four Women*, Saffronia wears a veil similar to Mignon's in the opening scene of *Illusions*).

In terms of the issue of passing and outing, these visual markers are subtle, yet significant. Dash offers these visual hints towards Mignon's racial identity, which operate by not only directing the audience through the nuanced narrative of passing, but arguably, in the context of the film itself, through Mignon's sense of style, by suggesting that her performance of passing does not mean she is *actively* claiming a white identity. Instead, she is actually projecting her 'true' racial identity – subtly, but still openly – in a way that suggests she is not choosing to portray herself as white out of shame, but instead, for protection – both economically and socially. After all, other Black people around her would have likely recognized these subtle signs, such as the double-V (Klotman 194). As well, it supports Mignon's claim that her colleagues merely assumed she was white, and "didn't ask" about her identity, as she tells her mother in the phone booth. Mignon's passing is not founded on individual shame – as the "tragic mulatto" trope might suggest – but instead on the ignorance of white-dominated institutions. Again, Dash is commenting on the "double consciousness" (Du Bois, *Souls of Black Folk* 3) and the "categorical and totalizing" treatments faced by Black individuals through the normalization and hegemony of whiteness (Renov qtd. in Stewart 2015, 258). Indeed, as Gaines suggests, "All passing is not equal and all passing is not necessarily masquerade" (*Fire & Desire* 156). In a way, by passing, Mignon demonstrates the powers of silence (Ryan, "Outing" 1323-4; see also Hill Collins 104; Jackson 675; Boon et al. 97-101;

Tsalach 78); she refuses to conform to the "white lens" of society – to those *a priori*, ideologically white assumptions – choosing instead a more embodied form of self-expression and reclamation. "She reinterprets history and, using new symbols, she shapes new myths," Gloria Anzaldúa writes of the *mestiza* consciousness, "She learns to transform the small "I" into the total Self" (104-5). Unlike traditional passing narratives that see the fall of the "tragic mulatto," *Illusions* sees the onus fall upon the white individuals and institutions that, in their "attempts to create racially pure cultural spaces" (Gaines, *Fire & Desire* 158), fail to recognize the complexities of Black identity.

The telegram itself is also significant. Mignon suggests to her superior that this kind of story could make for a new and exciting type of film – a war film that tells a real story, about real Americans. Mignon says, "The time is right for real life dramas. Let's be the first studio to turn the tide around and give the public situations and characters that they can recognize as part of their own lives ... C.J., let me take on a project, let me show you what I can do!" (Dash, "Illusions" 201) Mignon's idea is immediately shut down, however, thus setting both the thematic tone for the rest of the film, as well as the theoretical fire for Mignon to transform and redefine this industry. As Minh-ha writes of the Inappropriate Other, Mignon cannot tell the story of her *self*, without telling the story of *others* (Minh-ha, "Outside In" 133-4). Existing in not only an industry, but a nation that assumes a white status quo, is to exist *a priori* as Other (Anzaldúa 108). Finding herself identifying with the untold story of the Navajo Indians – an insider/outsider; an absent presence – Mignon realizes that these are the stories she wishes to share on the silver screen. And these are the stories she believes 'Others' would like to see as well: the

stories of real, everyday Americans, those who do not necessarily reflect the "white walls," as Mignon says, of Hollywood.

As well, I believe it is particularly significant that we, as viewers, see the telegram before we are introduced to Mignon herself. The telegram precedes Mignon, suggesting that the *Other*, in a way, always precedes the *self* (Cixous and Calle-Gruber 13). We see the story before we see the 'self.' Like Dash, Mignon is interested, first and foremost, in telling the stories of Others – stories that have long been ignored by the white lens of Hollywood. One of these stories is *in her hands* – literally, and figuratively. If "people make films about themselves," then with the "Other" as filmmaker, we will ultimately be seeing films about *other* selves, in all of their multifaceted, complex, and subjective realities.

A Seat at the Table

In the final scene of *Illusions*, just after Mignon and Ester take their contemplative walk around the studio, Bedsford confronts Mignon about her 'true identity' in the studio's main office. Refusing to let Bedsford shame her, Mignon says, "I'm not ashamed of who I am," adding:

> I never once saw a film showing "my boys" fighting for this country, building this country […] Your scissors and your paste methods have eliminated my history, my participation in this country … And the influence of that screen cannot be overestimated […] We're overseas defending a democracy that we can't get at home […] I'd like to make that movie, Lieutenant! […] I thought there was nothing here for me. I wanted to leave this … magic carpet we call film […] Now

> I'm going to stay. I'll stay right here and I'll fight because I want to do what you do […] You fight your war … and I'll fight mine. (Dash, "Illusions" 212-2)

As Mignon talks to Bedsford, proclaiming her identity as a Black woman and admonishing the state of race relations in Hollywood and beyond, she effectively takes control of the conversation and the space of the room. After staking her claims to the film industry, and reducing Bedsford to silence, she confidently moves towards the studio chief's empty chair. By taking this seat – a seat whose grandeur is effectively established by a shiny Oscar statuette on the desk – she is essentially giving herself a 'seat at the table,' a table marked by those exclusive 'seats' reserved for such titles as "author," "director," and even, "self." Once seated in the director's chair, Mignon's thoughts are conveyed through a reflective voiceover, bringing a sliver of the private into this otherwise public space: "Yes! I wanted to use the power of the motion picture, for there are many stories to be told … and many battles to begin" (Dash, "Illusions" 212). In what is traditionally a white male's domain, Mignon is determined to carve a space for herself, to (re)claim her voice, and to share the countless stories of others that remain to be heard.

Although set in the past – 1942 – the open-ended yet hopeful future set up by Mignon at the end could very well be a stand-in for Dash as she herself writes – and films – this scene forty years later, in 1983 (Mellencamp, "Making History" 83; Ryan "Outing" 1322). As Ryan suggests, "With *Illusions*, Dash creates a […] vehicle for outing herself as a Black feminist filmmaker and for articulating her own distinct cultural commitments, experiences, and vision" ("Outing" 1328). However, some critics feel that the inconclusive ending is a weakness in Dash's film (Griffin and Hartman 369; hooks, *Black*

Looks 129). They believed Dash left too many questions unanswered: Would Mignon remain at the studio now that her identity was disclosed? How would she go about telling these 'new' stories? In my mind, these unanswered questions do not make the film weak. In fact, I believe that if we consider the context of race and representation in film theory and history, and the traditions of Black women's autobiography in particular, we can see that this ending is a powerful (and arguably deliberate) doorway, a doorway that leaves open the possibilities for contemporary filmmakers who may see themselves in Dash or her fictional self, Mignon. After all, as Alison Easton (2000) claims, "All autobiography is, of course, by its very nature an unfinished story" (177). In a way, Mignon's pledge to continue to use the power of the motion pictures to tell her stories, and the stories of other insider-outsiders, leaves open a door for Dash herself to step in, and out – through the lens from the fictional 1942, back to 1983 – where she can continue carrying Mignon's fiery, filmic torch on towards the future. In this sense, we may view Mignon as an autobiographical ancestor to Dash (Mellencamp, "Making History" 83). If "people make films about themselves," as Mignon says to Ester, then Dash, the voice behind the script and the camera, is making a film not only about her fictional *self*, but about (and for) the countless *other* Black women who may have struggled, and continue to struggle, to have their stories seen and heard on that elusive, illusory, silver screen.

Chapter 4:

What If?: The Speculative Fictions of Space and Place

> I have felt the age-old triangle of mother father and child, with the 'I' at its eternal core, elongate and flatten out into the elegantly strong triad of grandmother mother daughter, with the 'I' moving back and forth flowing in either or both directions as needed. Woman forever, My body, a living representation of other life older longer wiser. The mountains and valleys, trees, rocks. Sand and flowers and water and stone. Made in earth.
> Audre Lorde (*Zami*, xvi)

Scene 3. Ibo Landing, Sea Islands of the South, 1902.

A close-up view shows a woman holding the soil of the Sea Islands in her hands. She pauses long enough to notice that, even beyond the tinge of rusty brown earth, the skin on her hands is stained a deep, indigo colour. In slow motion, a gust of wind blows the soil – now specks of dust – through the woman's fingers. The dust scatters in a moment of seemingly controlled chaos. Drums are heard in the distance, blending with the bustling winds, and the rustling of cicadas. The muddling of music and nature creates a new composition that rests somewhere between the real and the imagined. Like a rhythmic chant, it is as if the island itself is speaking. To whom does it speak? And what does it say?

If *Illusions* tells the story of Hollywood's structural inequalities and exclusionary ideologies, then *Daughters of the Dust* tells the story of rebellion. Thematically, it presents a rebellion against the mainstream "History with a capital 'H'" narratives which have often excluded the voices of non-Western 'Others' (Glissant 75). But in the context

of the film itself, as a cultural product of its time, it also represents a rebellion against Hollywood, and against the silences that have plagued the cinematic histories of Black Americans. As suggested in Chapter 3, we might consider Dash's 1983 short film, *Illusions*, to be a predecessor to her 1991 feature film, *Daughters of the Dust*. With Mignon as the film ancestor of Dash (Mellencamp, "Making History" 83), Dash carries on her legacy by creating another poignant and necessary film that highlights the stories of those that have, for too long, gone unheard.

At the same time, I would like to consider the Peazant family in *Daughters* as fictional ancestors to Mignon. Just as the Peazant family prepares itself for a migration to the industrial north, for Mignon, Hollywood becomes the next frontier – a journey towards the space of self-representation and self-definition. Mignon represents the next generation who are trying to find a place – and sense of belonging – on the U.S. mainland. With this cyclical perspective of Dash's work, we see how connections to the ancestors are central in the understanding of space, place, and self. Through her films, Dash steps in and out of history, between memory and imagination. In the process she creates a cinematic circle of remembrance, re-presentation, and re-writing.

Daughters of the Dust, Julie Dash's first feature film, depicts a day in the life of the Peazants, a Gullah family who are descendants of former slaves, as they prepare to migrate to the U.S. mainland and leave their Sea Island home behind – and in the process, their traditional beliefs and practices – for the promises of progress and modernity. While narratively, the film is structured around the family's planned journey from the 'Sea Islands of the South' to the industrial north, thematically, it is also about journeys in all of their historical, spiritual, and mythical complexities. In this chapter, I will not attempt to

chart these journeys, per se, but instead offer a way of thinking about linkages and longings across literature, theories, and histories – both fictional, nonfictional, and those which exist in-between. As I will explore, *Daughters of the Dust*, itself, exists in this state of in-betweenness.

Dash was originally interested in her family's own personal history of life in the U.S. South and their eventual journey to the industrial north. In particular, she was interested in their Gullah culture and heritage. Also called Geechee, the Gullah are descendants of West Africans who remained on the U.S. Sea Islands after the abolishment of slavery. Due in part to their identification with island life as distinct from the mainland, as well with their commitment to traditions of language, food, and spirituality, to this day the Gullah have held on to many characteristics of their West African heritage (Alao 41-2; Dash, "Making *Daughters*" 6; Wardi 33-4). When Dash wanted to learn about her Gullah heritage, to help guide the writing of *Daughters*, she asked her relatives about their memories of this time in the south. However, many of them refused to open up, forcing Dash to regroup and reimagine how she might learn, and write about, her Gullah history. Like many others writing and living in the realm of the Black Diaspora, she had to consider alternative historical and narrative routes in order to (re)imagine and (re)write her story. Drawing from such writers and thinkers as Toni Morrison, M. NourbeSe Philip, Dionne Brand, and Carol Boyce Davies, I will consider themes of autobiography and the archive, of history and the imagination, of cultural connections and crossings, and the geographical journeys that are not necessarily charted by maps, but by memories, emotions, and bodies, and the stories that link them all across space, place, and time.

Autobiographical Absences

When Julie Dash embarked on the creative journey that would ultimately become *Daughters of the Dust*, she faced several barriers in the storytelling process. Initially inspired by her own family's history in the southern United States, and their eventual migration north, Dash admits that the process of collecting her family's stories was not easy. Reflecting on these early days of the film's conception, she writes:

> When I probed my relatives for information about the family history in South Carolina, or about our migration north to New York, they were often very reluctant to discuss it. When things got too personal, too close to memories they didn't want to reveal, they would close up, push me away, tell me to go ask someone else. I knew then that the images I wanted to show, the story I wanted to tell, had to touch an audience the way it touched my family. It had to take them back, take them inside their family memories, inside our collective memories. (Dash, "Making *Daughters*" 5)

Despite the reluctance of her family, Dash was determined to piece together the stories that made up the fabric of their shared histories. "Soon," she writes, "I was off, running faster and faster, trying to find more and more information that would allow me to uncover this story" ("Making *Daughters*" 5). She journeyed across the country, from the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture in Harlem, to the National Archives in Washington D.C., to the research library at UCLA, and finally, to the Penn Center on St. Helena Island (Dash, "Making *Daughters*" 5). She spent "countless hours" in these libraries and archives, pouring over old photographs, newspapers, magazines, and books, searching for any clues and insights that might help fill in the historical and narrative gaps

left by the silence of her relatives (Dash, "Making *Daughters*" 5). She used this archival material to help craft the storyline and the characters, and to help inform the cinematic details such as costume, setting, and the Gullah language. Although she initially intended to make a short silent film – what she envisioned as "a kind of 'Last Supper' before migration and the separation of the family" – she quickly realized that she would not be able to do justice to the intricacy of these stories without the longer format of a feature film (Dash, "Making *Daughters*" 5-6). "There was too much information," she writes, reflecting on her narrative process, "and it had to be shared" ("Making *Daughters*" 6).

Daughters of the Dust was the product of approximately ten years of research, writing, financing, and filming (Dash and Baker 165; Dash, "Making *Daughters*" 4-6; for more on the film's financing, see Chapter 2). However, the threads of its story can be traced well before the 1980s. During her training in New York City, Dash worked primarily in documentary filmmaking, which was the dominant medium on the east coast. However, as I discussed earlier in Chapter 1, after observing her family's reactions to documentary storytelling, she decided she wanted to pursue narrative filmmaking. After inviting family members to the premiere of one of her early films, she found they were reluctant to attend the screenings. After probing them further, they would say, "Can't you tell a story?" She then came to the realization "that people in the community want to see a *story*" (Dash and Baker 154; emphasis in original). Narrative film was "more relaxing" and "a little less of an imposition," Dash surmised (Dash and Baker 154). Knowing that the same information, themes, and stories, could ideally be portrayed in either format of filmmaking, she decided to move towards a style that would be most palatable and accessible to her own community. This artistic move, however, would involve an even

bigger move, one that would take her across the country to Los Angeles. But as Dash realized, storytelling and community were connected, which in a way, transcended the distance and boundaries across space and place.

It was also around this time in the early 1970s that Dash developed an interest in the work of several influential Black writers, such as Toni Morrison, Toni Cade Bambara, John Williams, and poets such as Sonia Sanchez (Dash and Baker 150). In an interview with Houston A. Baker Jr., she says, "I believe I was very much influenced and informed by their work," adding that during her time in college, she and her peers would "perform" or "act out the poetry" (150-151). This was inspired in part by the conversational style of such writers, particularly Toni Cade Bambara, which she describes as being like "the way your mother used to talk to you, the way your grandparents would speak to you," adding that, "I would go as far as to say [Toni Cade Bambara's] work has an influence on *Daughters of the Dust*" (Dash and Baker 150-151). Toni Morrison's writing, too, offered Dash a "depth of character" that she had not encountered before, adding that it helped her realize "the uniqueness of character that you could only see in your own family" (Dash and Baker 152). Here we see the importance of the performative element of storytelling – the ability to say, experience, and embody the words on a page (Christian, "Race for Theory" 68; Morrison, "Rootedness" 59; Myerhoff 234) – and the influence of family history and oral traditions upon contemporary Black women writers. Dash's research and writing not only helped change the cinematic landscape of the U.S., but it also contributed to the traditions of African, and Black American narratives through a contemporary lens.

Dash admits to being not only inspired by the great Black American writers of the 1960s and 1970s, but also by the African griots whose style of storytelling still carries on

through contemporary traditions. She describes how after learning about these griots, who would narrate their family's history over the course of days, or sometimes weeks, she came to the realization that the possibilities of storytelling could exist beyond the conventions of Western narrative structures (Dash and Baker 151). Learning from these storytellers, she realized, "stories would expand outward and then come back inward, and that, yes, that was a viable way of telling a story, as opposed to sticking to the male Western narrative, which stems from the tall tale or the book" (Dash and Baker 151; see also Martin, "I Do Exist" 14). It was then that she decided not to conform to Western narrative expectations when writing *Daughters of the Dust*, and to instead draw more upon African traditions (Dash and Baker 151). With this rejection of Western narrative structures, and the reclamation of traditional, African narrative structures, Dash situates herself, as a filmmaker, within the continuum of Black American writers of the 60s and 70s, and the broader ancestral history of storytelling (Dash and Baker 151).

Dash eventually moved from the east coast, and thus from documentary filmmaking, to the west coast, which is the nation's hub for narrative filmmaking. Despite the distance from her home and family, Los Angeles provided her with the mentorship and creative environment that allowed her to hone her scriptwriting skills. Reflecting on this journey west, she writes, "I always knew I wanted to make films about African American women. To tell stories that had not been told. To show images that had not been seen" (Dash, "Making *Daughters*" 4).

Although she was keen to share these images and stories through fiction, she still found inspiration from 'real' stories – the stories her family would tell, and later, from the stories she encountered in the archives. Around 1975, when she was still living and

studying in Los Angeles, she began to conceive of the story that would later become *Daughters of the Dust*. She became intrigued by the photography of James Van Der Zee, and in particular, his collection that featured Black women at the turn of the century (Dash, "Making *Daughters*" 4). With both her family's southern roots, and these historical photographs, she writes, "the images and ideas combined and grew" (Dash, "Making *Daughters*" 4). Later, in 1981, she began the research that would help inform the script for her first feature film. As mentioned earlier, Dash faced silence and resistance from her family with regard to their history in the Old South and their subsequent migration north. It was then that she took to the archives to learn more about her Gullah ancestry. On this learning experience, she writes:

> The research was fascinating. In fact, if I were not making films, I would probably be glad to spend the rest of my life digging around libraries. I learned so much about the history and experience of African American people. One of the most fascinating discoveries I made was of the existence of over 60,000 West African words or phrases in use in the English language, a direct result of the slave trade. (Dash, "Making *Daughters*" 5)

Drawing from the archives, she used these pieces of history to help shape the characters, the settings, and the storyline for *Daughters of the Dust*. And while some of the images found in the film were inspired by what Dash learned through her archival research, they also reflect many of the traditions and languages experienced by contemporary Black Americans. For example, Dash describes the hand signals used by two men in *Daughters* – which I explore in Chapter 2 – as an allusion to the nonverbal modes of communication developed by ancient African secret societies which have been passed down over many

generations and are still used by gangs and fraternities to this day. For example, Dash found that her archival experience helped her more fully understand the behaviours and traditions she observed in her childhood. She writes:

> As a young girl growing up, I remember watching young men on a basketball court or at other gathering places, and before they would drink together, they always poured a little on the ground. I always thought that was a strange and funny ritual. Later, during my research for *Daughters*, I discovered the West African rituals of pouring libations, a show of respect to the ancestors, to family and to tradition. As the men on the basketball court would say, "This is for the brothers who are no longer here or couldn't be here today." (Dash, "Making *Daughters*" 6).

For Dash, weaving these pieces of history into the fabric of her film is not just a matter of portraying the past, it is about engaging with our pasts, through both tradition and the imagination, to more fully understand how we exist in the present. And moreover, to show how the past exists perpetually through the present.

Parting the Veil

Saidiya Hartman (2008) suggests that "the loss of stories sharpens the hunger for them" (8). But how do you tell a story that resists its own telling (Boon et al. 123-7; Philip, *Zong!* 191)? Or as Hartman probes, "How does one tell impossible stories?" (Hartman 10) To translate the images and texts buried deep within the archives into a visual spectacle for the screen can stir up emotions deeply rooted in problematic pasts (Sheppard 225; G. Tate, "A Word" 70). When the complexities of trauma become intertwined with

the intimacies of family history, the process of telling those stories can become an ethical and artistic balancing act.

These are likely the types of issues that plagued Dash in the early stages of writing *Daughters*. However, they are also issues that have long been faced by artists and writers working within the auto/biographical realm. As discussed in Chapter 3, autobiography as a genre has offered an important literary outlet for Black women in particular wishing to document their experiences. At the same time, the genre itself has also been the source of exclusion and oppression for those same writers. For example, access to, and acknowledgement of, authorship was a barrier facing many Black women writers who were already sharing their stories; women were actively writing the stories of their lives but were often discriminated against and excluded from autobiographical classifications, and as authors in their own right (Braxton 1-9; Chinosole 146; Easton 177).

Considering that it was uncommon, and in some places, a criminal offense, to teach slaves how to read and write, Joanne Braxton (1989) observes that early autobiographical writing by Black Americans "linked the quest for freedom with the quest for literacy" (15). In a way, we might then view the Black "autobiographical impulse" as a kind of journey in itself: a journey towards literacy, freedom, and legitimacy as authors in their own right (Braxton 15-16). Moreover, we might then view this impulse as a journey *through* self, community, and history. As Pamela Moss (2001) suggests, by stretching and blurring the boundaries of the genre we might benefit from seeing autobiography not just as a document of one's life, but as life itself (19).

As Moss and others have observed, autobiography is, at its core, a process "not only of recording, in the sense of documenting, orienting and analyzing, but also of

becoming, in the sense of lives, subjectivities, and identities" (Moss 19; see also Perreault and Kadar 6). It is this notion of becoming that I would like to emphasize here. My consideration of Dash's work through an autobiographical lens is not so much concerned with fitting her work and approach within established literary classifications, or merely inserting her films into an already established canon. Instead, I am concerned with broadening what it means to be autobiographical: not to position Dash upon those canonized shelves, but to highlight the margins, the space between the lines which she had been eloquently and artistically occupying for years. If we turn our attention to these spaces – spaces often mistaken as empty, or void (Boon et al. 97-101) – we can see the ways in which Dash shares the stories of her *self*, as shared *with* and *through* the stories of her family, her community, and their collective histories.

In *Woman, Native, Other* (1989), Trinh T. Minh-ha claims that, "The world's earliest archives or libraries were the memories of women" (121). Transmitted from mouth to ear, body to body, and hand to hand, this process of storytelling involves more than the imagination (Minh-ha, *Woman, Native, Other* 121). It involves sight, sound, smell, taste, and touch; it requires a complex interplay between the senses (Minh-ha, *Woman, Native, Other* 121). In *Daughters of the Dust*, Nana Peazant, the elder of the family, recounts how slaves could not record their experiences in writing, so they had to rely on memories to keep their stories alive for future generations. Even for Julie Dash herself, finding written accounts of her family history and of Gullah culture was often difficult because many of these people did not have the privilege (or the desire, considering the traumas of slave histories) to formally document their stories (Dash, "Making *Daughters*" 5). As a result, in *Daughters of the Dust*, Dash rejected the

mainstream white-male narrative structure – usually characterized by linearity – for a more nonlinear, fluid narrative rooted in African oral tradition (Dash and Baker 151; Martin, "I Do Exist" 13). The significance of women as bearers of the archive is demonstrated further in Dash's choice to have two narrators: Nana Peazant – the matriarch who represents the past and ties to tradition; and the "Unborn Child" – the soon-to-be daughter of Eula and Eli Peazant, a spectral figure who represents the unknown and the potential of the future. Through Dash's use of two narrators, we see how the memories of women – both young and old, past and present – are central to our understandings of the linkages across space and time, and how the imagination can help us fill in the spaces of the unseen and unheard.

In her essay, "The Site of Memory," Toni Morrison (2008) explores the traditions and transformations in Black women's literature through these notions of memory and oral literature. Although she situates herself primarily as a fiction writer, Morrison claims that her "own literary heritage is the autobiography" ("Site of Memory" 65). She cites the particular significance of slave narratives, including autobiographies, recollections, and memoirs, on the origins of Black American print literature ("Site of Memory" 65). While the creation of these narratives helped reveal the terrible realities of slavery, they were also seen as a route to power (Morrison, "Site of Memory" 68; see also Braxton 2). Considering the limits of authorship set in place by the white overseers of non-white writers (as discussed in Chapter 3 of this text), Morrison is particularly interested in the narrative gaps left in place ("Site of Memory" 70). For example, she identifies the tendency in slave narratives to skip over the particularly harrowing details of their stories, adding instead phrases such as "let us drop a veil over these proceedings too terrible to

relate" ("Site of Memory" 69; see also Prince 8). Citing "popular tastes" as a possible influence on these writers' self-censorship, Morrison feels it her duty as a Black woman writer to "rip that veil" and reveal the realities of history – the hauntings of slavery – that have long been hidden under illusory national narratives ("Site of Memory" 69-70).

Although Morrison uses fiction, which she defines as a product of imagination – or something separate from fact – she does not distinguish it from 'truth' ("Site of Memory" 71-2). For Morrison, truth does not exist outside of human intelligence ("Site of Memory" 72). Although her writing is often described as "fantastic, or mythic, or magical, or unbelievable," she rejects these classifications because they suggest an opposition to truth, which she does not believe is separate from fiction ("Site of Memory" 72). As such, her aim is to "fill in the blanks that the slave narratives left – to part the veil that was so frequently drawn, to implement the stories that I heard" ("Site of Memory" 72).

It is interesting to note that this imagery of the veil occurs in several of Dash's films. As discussed in Chapter 3, Mignon Duprée, the protagonist in *Illusions*, is first introduced wearing a veil, and in Dash's earlier short film, *Four Women* (1975), we see similar stylings with the character Saffronia. In these cases, the veil acts as a reference to literary traditions that often portrayed 'mulatto' characters as living under a veil, both physically and figuratively. In *Daughters,* when we are first introduced to Yellow Mary – a member of the Peazant family – she, too, is wearing a veil. While it is not explicitly mentioned whether she is of mixed race, her name – "Yellow Mary" – was given to her due to the fact that she had lighter skin than other members of the Peazant family. In the

eyes of others, Yellow Mary, like Mignon, is living a life of ambiguity – a life in the in-between.

With Yellow Mary, however, we see how Dash uses the veil not as a trope, but as a more complicated symbol of the intersectional complexities of Black feminist subjectivity. When we first see Yellow Mary, she is on a boat making her way across a swampy marsh towards her Sea Island home. She has spent most of her life living on the U.S. mainland, as well as in Cuba, where she worked as a prostitute and a wet nurse. When she returns for the Peazant family reunion, her family casts her off as a "ruint" woman (Kempley); she is a woman, but in the eyes of others, she is not a wife, and not a mother, but something *in between*. Joining her is her 'travelling partner' Trula, who, while not made explicitly known in the film, was later revealed by Dash to be Yellow Mary's romantic partner (Dash and hooks 66-7). In a subtle, but still powerful way, Yellow Mary shatters the oversimplified mulatto stereotype; we see how matters of race, gender, class, and sexuality intersect in an intricate interplay of identity, politics, and history. As a Black woman with a complex history, Yellow Mary demonstrates the arbitrariness of binaries, of boundaries, and of borders. Like the muddy swamps that surround her Sea Island home, identity categories, too, become muddied (Boon et al. 35-40). As she crosses the water, she represents the countless crossings – both physical and psychological – made by Black women, and other marginalized and diasporic peoples over the centuries (Anzaldúa 99-101).

On the ambiguity and "alien" consciousness of being a mixed-race woman, or *mestiza*, Gloria Anzaldúa (2007) writes that there are countless routes and crossings for such a woman to take (101). This leaves such a woman:

> [F]loundering in uncharted seas […] she is subjected to a swamping of her psychological borders. She has discovered that she can't hold concepts or ideas in rigid boundaries. The borders and walls that are supposed to keep the undesirable ideas out are entrenched habits and patterns of behavior; these habits and patterns of behavior are the enemy within. (Anzaldúa 101)

The veil, then, may be interpreted as an aesthetic marker for a "cultural collision" (Anzaldúa 100), or a "contact zone" (Pratt 34; see also Goeman 2) – that murky space through which Yellow Mary must navigate between, and across, self and other. And when Yellow Mary eventually – and rather stoically – lifts her veil when greeting her family members, we are reminded of the bodies that exist in-between; crossings are not only geographical, but political, emotional, and corporeal.

Like Anzaldúa, Morrison is interested in the role of history, myth, and memory upon the transformation of the self (Anzaldúa 104-5). From Morrison's experience as a writer and editor, she admits that no matter how "fictional" a narrative might be, "the act of imagination is bound up with memory" ("Site of Memory" 76-77). Morrison gives the example of the Mississippi River, and how it was straightened out in certain places in order to accommodate more houses and livable space ("Site of Memory" 77). Because of this artificial manipulation, the river would often flood these areas. Morrison suggests, however, that the river does not actually flood ("Site of Memory" 77). Instead, she says, "it is remembering" ("Site of Memory" 77). It is remembering its old contours, its routes, its origins. Like the river, writers, too, are in a constant act of remembering, of recollecting. It is an "emotional memory," one rooted in (and routed through) the body – a body that remembers through touch, sound, through the seemingly endless sensorial

experiences of a life (Morrison, "Site of Memory" 77; Brand, *Map to the Door* 191-2). Katherine McKittrick (2000) might describe this as a "bodymemory" – memory that is "passed down and re-interpreted through generational remembrances, teachings, forewarnings and advice" (228). Like a flood, this bodymemory – a body becoming – is nonetheless "chaotic, continuous and restless" (McKittrick, "Who Do You Talk To" 228; see also Brand, *Map to the Door* 121; Wardi 5-6). It is the writer's "rush of imagination" that floods with memory (Morrison, "Site of Memory" 77). Morrison claims that, in addition to her own memory work, she also aims to "extend, fill in and complement slave autobiographical narratives" ("Site of Memory" 77). Like the river, Morrison remembers where she was before she was "straightened out" ("Site of Memory" 77; see also Boon et al. 59).

It is worthwhile then, to align Morrison's notion of flooding – both of the land and of memory – with Dash's filmmaking process, which similarly blends both the real and the imagined through the narrative and the visual. As not only director of *Daughters*, but also its writer and producer, Dash holds full control of the narrative. Much like her film ancestor Mignon, the story is in her hands from the start, but it is a story plagued by silences, absences, and resistance (Hartman 8). Like Morrison, Dash works with fiction, drawing from the imagination, allowing her to produce acts of invention. However, as she admits, the foundation of her story was her own family's history, as informed by her archival research on the broader cultural history of the Gullah. Just as Morrison finds the roots of her fiction in the traditions of Black autobiography, Dash too crafts a fictional film world out of the imaginative, but nonetheless real, stories of her familial, cultural, and geographical surroundings. While there are gaps and absences in these histories –

there is “silence in the archive” (Hartman 3) – that does not mean these histories did not exist. They “cannot be erased,” as Patricia Mellencamp (1994) writes, “Like age, we carry our history, our forebears, on our faces, their spirits indelibly imprinted in our memories” (77). There is a hidden, unconscious way in which history exists, and a bodily experience through which it persists. For Dash, there is a blending of fiction and autobiography that culminates through the visceral experiences of imagination and remembrance. History is memory, and memory is history – “reincarnated, recollected” (Mellencamp, “Making History” 77).

While Dash faced auto/biographical absences through family silences, there were also undoubtedly gaps in her archival exploration of their past. Some events might not have been recorded, and if they were, such documents might not have been preserved. Some stories might have been lost altogether. Just as Morrison turns to the imagination to fill in the margins, the spaces left by narrative silences in slave histories – “Only the act of imagination can help me” (Morrison, “Site of Memory” 71) – Dash turns to fiction, but a fiction still rooted in reality, to share the stories of her family, her culture, and her own self. As the river has memory, flooding the land in an act of remembrance (and in a way, resistance to the path artificially carved for it), Dash too resists the straight lines of history imposed by more mainstream, national narratives. Her determination to explore the margins, to listen to the silences, and uncover the stories that have long been hidden, demonstrates the fluidity of history; like Morrison, Dash is remembering, resisting, and restorying history, and allowing the flood of memory to reshape the past, the present, and the possibility of futures to come.

Recall, for example, what Dash writes of her filmmaking journey: "the images I wanted to show, the story I wanted to tell, had to touch an audience the way it touched my family. It had to take them back, take them inside their family memories, inside our collective memories" (Dash, "Making *Daughters*" 5). As well, we might consider Dash's determination to share the stories of her family and cultural history, despite the resistance she faced. Much like Morrison's determination to strip the veil that was once drawn over slave narratives, Dash, too, strives to fill in the spaces left by narrative silences evoked by such phrases as "'proceedings too terrible to relate'" (Morrison, "Site of Memory" 70). Dash's experience of family members refusing to share their story, of telling her to ask somebody else instead, could very well be read as a contemporary variation of these older, 'terrible' 'proceedings.' Dash, like Morrison, felt it her duty as a storyteller and artist to shed a light on the histories that have long been overshadowed by Western-defined narratives of 'History' (Glissant 75). In this way, Dash created what Mellencamp would term an "*affective* history," one that "balances the experimental and the experiential" ("Making History" 77; emphasis in original). Mellencamp expands upon this affective history, relating it to an empirical feminism – a form of feminism rooted in both archive and activism – which works to "alter the course of time" ("Making History" 77). It is a (re)writing of the past, in a way, through the poetic blending of space, time, and story. The past exists, in turn, through the present (Easton 174).

In many ways, it is through fiction, through the experimental, that one might even begin to tackle the tremendous weight of historical silences and collective traumas. In her book-length poem *Zong!* (2008), Canadian essayist and poet M. NourbeSe Philip attempts this daunting task of writing the 'impossible' through poetry (see also Philip *Genealogy*

of Resistance, 130-1). This work was inspired by the tragic 1781 incident of the slave ship "Zong," in which crew members deliberately drowned over a hundred African slaves in order to collect insurance payments. After coming across a reference to the Zong massacre in 1990, Philip felt compelled to write about it. Philip composed the poem entirely of words from the Gregson vs. Gilbert court case, the only public document concerning the massacre, in order to tell "the story that cannot be told yet must be told" ("Zong!"). With a poetic assemblage of words and a poignant arrangement of space, Philip finds power through the fragments of history, memory, and law ("Zong!"). *Zong!* thus becomes an "anti-narrative" that resists its own telling through its own haunting resistance to a seemingly logical form and structure. Thus, Philip *re*-presents the official legal history in an effort to re-write the histories wiped away by the waves surrounding the Zong. Like Philip, Dash was interested in presenting 'real' historical events and issues relating to the people and places of this era, but she wanted to do something "different," which is what lead her to the poetic territory of narrative filmmaking (Dash and hooks 32). In conversation with bell hooks about the power of poetry, she recalls one of her school teachers who said, "what makes poetry good is that poets will say things using words that you use every day but they say them in a way that you have never heard it said before. And then it means so much more" (Dash and hooks 32). For both Dash and Philip, it is only through the fictions of fact and the poetry of the page, that one can even begin to address the traumas of the past.

Here we might consider Marianne Hirsch's (1997) theory of postmemory, which is concerned with experiences of intergenerational trauma (22; see also Easton 174). According to Hirsch, postmemory involves creative and imaginative ways of mediating

one's connection to the past for "those who grow up dominated by narratives that preceded their birth" (22). While Hirsch focuses on postmemory in relation to the Holocaust, it can also be applied to other traumatic cultural events, such as the transatlantic slave trade. Indeed, Hirsch's words resonate with the ideas put forth by Black women writers such as Morrison and Philip who suggest regarding (post)memories of slavery as both personal and cultural, individual and communal (Easton 175; Hirsch 22). Postmemory is thus a significant part of an individual's identity formation, even as it relates to a communal experience of memory (Easton 175). For Black American autobiographers then, where slave narratives are crucial to collective memories and histories, remembrance within a community becomes an important part of understanding one's own life as connected to the past, present, and future (Easton 175). As bell hooks writes, "Looking and looking back, black women involve ourselves in a process whereby we see our history as counter-memory, using it as a way to know the present and invent the future" (*Black Looks* 131). Although not without political and literary barriers, the autobiographical nature of slave narratives allowed individuals to claim a voice. Such narratives convey complex subjectivities while also documenting collective experiences and effects of "persistent trauma" (Easton 175). Indeed, as Saidiya Hartman claims, "loss gives rise to longing," and with these historical and archival silences, stories may be the only form of reparation (4).

This relationship between slave narratives and postmemory becomes particularly important when considering how difficult histories are often excluded from dominant narratives of the past (Easton 175). For example, Toni Morrison has commented on the notable absence of formal memorials to slavery in the United States, saying, "There is no

place you or I can go, to think about or not think about, to summon the presences of, or recollect the absences of slaves; nothing that reminds us of the ones who made the journeys and of those who did not make it" ("Bench by the Road"). This reluctance, or perhaps resistance, to incorporate particular histories into dominant national narratives leaves the process of memory and remembrance to individuals and their respective communities. Morrison claims that stories have the power to fill in those historical and spatial absences. Reflecting on her influential book *Beloved* (1987), Morrison admits that, "because such a place doesn't exist […] the book had to" ("Bench by the Road"). Dionne Brand suggests that Morrison's fiction offers a "rewriting of the myth of America" (*Map to the Door* 128). Morrison thus writes "against the official American narrative," and, according to Brand, "narrates the African-American presence that underpins the official story but is rarely, truly braided among the narratives of the 'pilgrims,' the 'founding fathers,' the 'west,' and so on" (*Map to the Door* 128; see also Christian, "Layered Rhythms" 495). We might argue that like Morrison, Dash takes "command of the national narrative" through the writing of fiction and myth, and the rewriting of history (Brand, *Map to the Door* 128). *Daughters* offers a chance to see the history of the nation in a new light, and through a new lens (Sharpe 124). Dash does not merely write Black Americans *into* history, rather she effectively rewrites the national narrative in an effort to redefine Black American histories – both 'real' and mythical (Dash and hooks 32). As Toni Cade Bambara suggests, it is this process of liberation through cinematic representation that Dash "intends to heal our imperialized eyes" (xii).

In a similar vein, bell hooks argues, "As red and black people decolonize our minds we cease to place value solely on the written document. We give ourselves back to

memory. We acknowledge that the ancestors speak to us in a place beyond written history" (*Black Looks* 193; see also Mellencamp, "Making History" 76). Memory, no longer relying on the text, becomes boundless. After all, as Guyanese poet Grace Nichols (1983) writes, "No it isn't easy to forget / What we refuse to remember" (19). Memory, she suggests, is something inexorable; it clings to us as a perpetual haunting. Indeed, as M. NourbeSe Philip posits, "Our entrance to the past is through memory – either oral or written. And water" (*Zong!* 203). It is worth noting here that Philip describes her book *Zong!* as "hauntological" (201), a term derived from Jacques Derrida's *Specters of Marx* (2006), referring to the ghostly presence of that which is not actually present (Derrida 10). The hauntological is thus not quite absent, and not quite present – a specter of both being and not being. It is, in this sense, much like history itself – a haunting presence that blurs the ontological between our pasts and presents.

Just as Philip understands *Zong!* as hauntological, so too, may we consider Dash's *Daughters of the Dust* as a work of haunting. Much like Philip, Dash faces the uneasy task of (re)storying the trauma of slave histories. In a 1991 interview with cultural critic Greg Tate, before the release of *Daughters*, Dash described the historical and spiritual significance of filming on location at St. Helena Island, one of the Sea Islands off the South Carolina coast. She stated, "The Sea Islands are sacred ground. All our ancestors came through these islands" (qtd. in G. Tate, "Homegirl Goddesses" 72). When Tate asked if she was consciously engaged in a "heroic, historic act" by making this film, Dash replies, "Absolutely" ("Homegirl Goddesses" 72). Dash asserted that everyone involved with *Daughters* was aware of the significance of the islands – the "processing point" in the forced migration of their ancestors between the 'Middle Passage' and Charleston

(Dash, "Making *Daughters*" 6; G. Tate, "Homegirl Goddesses" 72). She revealed that there were times, in moments between shoots, that people would weep at the emotional weight of this place.

Dash herself admitted that it was not easy translating African myths and spirituality for the screen, or negotiating the historical hauntings of the geographical space (G. Tate, "Homegirl Goddesses" 72; see also Wardi 45). "Every morning I'd get up and say, please ancestors help me," Dash recalled of her experience filming on the Sea Islands (qtd. in G. Tate, "Homegirl Goddesses" 72). Like Philip, Dash acknowledged the fact that there was really no way of knowing whether you were "on the right track" in the narrative process (G. Tate, "Homegirl Goddesses" 72). However, she knew that these were stories that had to be told, and histories that had to be honoured.

On this difficult process of telling and honouring, Christina Sharpe (2016) writes, "Those of us who teach, write, and think about slavery and its afterlives encounter myriad silences and ruptures in time, space, history, ethics, research, and method" (12). Indeed, at one point during filming, Dash and her crew found themselves tangled by these questions after coming across a cemetery of slave graves (G. Tate, "Homegirl Goddesses" 72). At first, they considered filming the graveyard scenes for *Daughters* here, thinking it would be a historically accurate setting – a way to honour, both spatially and spiritually, "the agents buried beneath" (Sharpe 12; G. Tate, "Homegirl Goddesses" 72). However, when getting ready to start filming, Dash and her production designer Kerry Marshall felt uneasy, deciding then to "find ground where people aren't buried" (Dash qtd. in G. Tate, "Homegirl Goddesses" 72). If Dash called on the ancestors for guidance in the (un)telling of this story – for "'permission' to bring the stories of these murdered Africans to light,"

as Philip writes (*Zong!* 202) – perhaps it was this visceral sense of unease that helped Dash realize she needed to rethink how to represent this difficult history.

Just as Philip considers *Zong!* as "a wake," or "a work that employs memory in the service of mourning" (202; Derrida 9; Sharpe 38), so too may we consider Dash's *Daughters* as a work of mourning. Although she chose not to use the real site of the graves as a setting in her film, Dash still used her filmmaking as an alternative commemorative space. She turned to fiction – to symbols and metaphors – as a more effective, and ethical, way to commemorate the voices silenced by, and the lives lost to, slavery. For example, at various points during the film, the camera cuts to a wood carving in the shape of a Black man, presumably broken off from a slave ship, floating in the swampy backwaters of the island (Wardi 48). Interestingly, the inspiration for this motif came from Dash's experience at a New York gallery which had a figurehead from the prow of a slave ship on display (Dash and Baker 165). In a conversation with Houston A. Baker, she recalls this encounter:

> It was huge, monstrous. It struck me as an awful joke, the idea that the people who built the slave ship decided to make the figurehead into an African warrior. And the vibes coming off of this thing were incredible, full of death […] And if I had seen a photograph or a drawing, I would have just said, "Oh." But when you see the thing carved out and you know that the slaves boarding the ship saw their own representation of themselves, tied up on the thing, it was just awful. (Dash and Baker 165)

None of the characters speak directly of this figurehead; it simply exists as a haunting fragment of the past. "This thing is forever floating and just rotting," Dash explains, "I

didn't want to have any dialogue going on about it, because sometimes dialogue actually diminishes things" (Dash and Baker 165). The figurehead thus exists as an ethereal, yet tangible, reminder of the persistence of the past through place, history, and myth. If Derrida's hauntology marks an absent presence, the fragment too, becomes a haunting – it exists through both absence and presence. We may also interpret the presence of this slave ship fragment alongside Philip's "exaqua," or exhumation of "liquid graves" (*Zong!* 201-2). The presence of the wood carving acts like a tombstone of the sea; it is a spectral marker of the countless lives tragically lost to the dark, murky waters that trace the Middle Passage.

Water, according to Philip, "appears to be the same yet is constantly in motion, affected by tidal movement" (*Zong!* 201; see also Wardi 4). Adding, "so too this memory appears stationary yet is shifting always. Repetition drives the event and the memory simultaneously, becoming a haunting, becoming spectral in its nature" (*Zong!* 201). We enter the past through memory and water, and with Dash's figurehead, we find the muddy merging of memory *through* water. In this way, the fragment – as a repetitive, visual motif – becomes "more precious, more beautiful than the whole, if only for its brokenness" (Philip, *Zong!* 201). It is through the space inherent to the fragment – the break, the rupture, the wound (Cixous and Calle-Gruber 16) – that we can come to understand the past, and to actually speak of it. In this sense, it is not unlike the poetic potential in the space of the margin. Philip writes, "Perhaps, the fragment allows for the imagination to complete its missing aspects – we can talk, therefore, of the poetics of fragmentation" (*Zong!* 201-2). Indeed, it is through the imagination that Dash finds a way to speak the unspeakable. Despite the significance of localizing the dead in the act of

mourning (Derrida 10; Philip, *Zong!* 202), Dash felt uneasy filming on a real slave gravesite. It was thus through the fictions of space and memory – the fictions of the fragment – that she was able to speak truth to the hauntings of history. As with *Zong!*, Dash shows that there is not always a "right" way of telling a story, but through poetic rendering and creative reimagining, the realities of trauma and history can be told through their "un-telling" (Philip, *Zong!* 207). The (hi)story becomes hauntological through its absent presence.

What if …: The Space of the Ellipses

In her book *Black Women, Writing and Identity: Migrations of the Subject* (1994), Carole Boyce Davies explores the difficult process of memory and history through the politics of language and location. Reflecting on her childhood experiences, she recalls a phrase she often heard uttered by Caribbean women: "It's not everything you can talk, but …" (152). According to Boyce Davies, this phrase was often spoken in domestic spaces by women, to women, when discussing familial or marital problems (152). She describes it as a kind of "formula or a code for talk even as it negated complete expression of feelings and of pain," adding, "The placement of the conjunction, 'but,' after the negation of the possibility of full speech signaled a determination to articulate, to challenge, to reveal, to share" (152). Boyce Davies continues by suggesting that this use of "but" is more than a conjunction, but a hint at opposition (152). In other words, it marks a dichotomy in the speech of marginalized peoples: a speech that is erased, silenced, or unheard within the discourse of dominant history and culture, but also a speech that "challenges that very construction of non-speech" (Boyce Davies 152; see also Philip, *She Tries Her Tongue*

56-9). This latter interpretation of the phrase places value on the alternative spaces in which Black women's voices can be heard (Boyce Davies 152-53). The "but …" preceding the phrase suggests a resistance – a resistance to categorization, to boundaries, and to closure. As Stuart Hall argues, "Meaning continues to unfold, so to speak, beyond the arbitrary closure" (74; Boyce Davies 153). With the ellipses, we see how a story can continue even after speech, and how voices can exist between the spatial boundaries of language (Boyce Davies 153).

Boyce Davies, here, is concerned with *location*, for "it is location which allows one to speak or not speak, to be affirmed in one's speech or rejected, to be heard or censored" (153). And with the politics of location come questions of place, displacement, boundaries, peripheries, and cores; of positionalities of gender, class, and sexuality; and of positionality in geographic, historical, and social terms (Boyce Davies 153). For Boyce Davies, positionality of location involves both physical and social space, for identity is not formed in one without the other (154; see also Goeman 133). She explains, "One's location may therefore be a site of creativity and re-memory; exploration, challenge, instability. Or it may be a site of further repression. But positionality assumes not necessarily fixity but movement" (Boyce Davies 154; see also Anzaldúa 99-101; Brand, *Map to the Door* 25; Mohanty 45-7; Quintanales 146-7). Through her analysis of this enigmatic phrase, Boyce Davies contributes to a rich history of Black feminist writing, which helps illuminate the intricacies of location and positionality, while also challenging traditional epistemologies and methodologies. The very process of Boyce Davies' writing – of exploring the margins of speech, and the spaces beyond the ellipses – shows how through critical self-reflection, we can begin to produce "a new space, an area of

transformation and change where we can no longer accept a factual or natural account of history, nor simply seek to retrieve a hidden authentic identity" (154; see also Hall 74-6).

Boyce Davies scatters her essay with the phrase – "***it's not everything you can talk, but …"*** (152-65) – often styled in italics and bold-font. It is striking both visually and narratively within what otherwise might be considered a traditional critical analysis. Resistance is represented not only at the level of the sentence, but it is also embodied. The essay itself becomes a resistance to closure, bringing the discourse of theory and methodology beyond the confines of the text and the page. In the conclusion to her essay, which also happens to be the conclusion to her book, Boyce Davies includes a subheading titled "Anti-Closure Parting" which is followed, in italicized bold, with: "It's not everything you can talk, but …" (165). Here, Boyce Davies herself, like the Caribbean women before her, straddles the borders of public and private, of speech and non-speech, and of closure and continuity. It makes one wonder what is said behind closed doors, and what is not heard in the open. And moreover, it makes one wonder what remains unspoken. In the mysterious ellipses, in that teasing "but," the reader is asked to consider what stories, what truths exist between the lines, in the spaces of the margin. And what stories continue to be told even when the book is closed. Or, in the case of Dash, when the film fades to black.

For example, the ending to *Daughters* may be considered a cinematic "Anti-Closure Parting" (Boyce Davies 165). Torn between the promises of 'progress' and their ties to tradition, the Peazant family part ways. Most members of the family are seen boarding boats, ready to begin their journey north. However, Nana Peazant, Yellow Mary, Iona, Eula and Eli decide to stay on the island – the sacred space of their ancestors.

In the final scene, we see Nana Peazant, Yellow Mary, and Eula walking along the sandy Sea Island beach as the Unborn Child runs behind them in slow motion (Dash, "Script" 164). As a narrator of the film, along with Nana Peazant, the Unborn Child offers the final words of the films: "We remained behind, growing older, wiser, stronger" (Dash, "Script" 164). Interestingly, in the screenplay, Dash notes that the Unborn Child is "recollecting" these moments, which is particularly interesting considering that her character exists as "unborn" in the film (Dash, "Script" 164). She thus exists simultaneously in the past, present, and future. Although she acts as a spiritual, guiding force for the family as they navigate cultural change, she also acts as a guiding narrative force to remind audiences of the importance of ancestral connections. The Unborn Child represents not only the nonlinear linkages across time and place, but of the potential of the unknown, and the possibilities of our futures. The final scene may thus be considered a beginning as much as an ending. We are unsure what will happen to the Peazant family in their migration north, but the presence of the Unborn Child in the final frame reassures us that the story will carry on, through myth, memory, and imagination, long after the family's parting.

Like Dash, Dionne Brand writes about the hauntings of family history and memory in her book, *A Map to the Door of No Return: Notes to Belonging* (2001). After asking her grandfather about their ancestral origins, she realizes that, with time and age, he has forgotten their African tribe's name, and thus, as Brand deduces, their history (Brand, *Map to the Door* 19). For Brand, the Door of No Return – the first point of forced migration for many African slaves – exists not just as a place on the map, but as a metaphor for place, a place both real and mythic for those living in the Diaspora today

(*Map to the Door* 18-19). A map to the Door of No Return cannot be drawn with traditional cartographic implements, but rather, comes into being through listening and imagination (Brand, *Map to the Door* 18). As Brand writes, "I have not visited the Door of No Return, but by relying on random shards of history and unwritten memoir of descendants of those who passed through it, including me, I am constructing a map of the region, paying attention to faces, to the unknowable, to unintended acts of returning" (*Map to the Door* 19). In a way, Brand's journey through the Door of No Return – in all its material and metaphoric imaginings – is much like Dash's journey through her own family's history. Both Brand and Dash were confronted with silences – silences from those who once remembered, like Brand's grandfather, and silences from those who wished not to remember, like Dash's family. In both cases, the auto/biographical journey involved an eclectic, elliptic, and fragmented means of recollection and remembrance – through the "shards of history" (Brand, *Map to the Door* 19), and the "scraps of memories" (Dash, "Script" 88). But even "looks of dismay and discomfort" (Brand, *Map to the Door* 19) – what we can imagine both Brand and Dash encountered – are important in the act of recollection. Dash, in particular, had to reroute her own remembrance through historical twists and turns that guided her through archives across the U.S., and brought her to her own creative re-writing – in the form of historical speculation – of her family's history.

This notion of historical speculation – a speculation born of a need to resist and re-story – seems to have been integral to Dash's understanding of her work. Reflecting on the making of *Daughters*, Dash admits that she was interested in the "what if" – or what

Boyce Davies might see as the "but…" – of a narrative (Dash and Baker 163; Dash and hooks 29). She says:

> I think we need to do more than try to document history. I think we need to probe. We need to have the freedom to romanticize history, to say "what if," to use history in a speculative way and create speculative fiction. I think we need to feel free to do that. We need to expand upon an idea, upon our thought on fact. (Dash and Baker 163)

While Dash adhered closely to her archival findings, she nevertheless conjured much of the narrative from her imagination, and from the fragments of information she had heard from her family. Much like Philip's process with *Zong!*, Dash drew on what was documented in books and newspapers, but ultimately, found that this was not enough to convey the intimacy and intricacy of the stories she wished to share. As a result, *Daughters* became a creative blending of fact and fiction, of poetry and the past.

In this way, *Daughters of the Dust* is a film that is resistant to mainstream historical discourses even through its own engagement with and re-writing of them. For example, Dash was interested in bringing a "basic integrity" to Gullah culture and history (Dash and hooks 28). However, because of her keen eye to historical authenticity, many audiences confused Dash's experimental fiction with ethnography. But this is not what Dash intended. She explained in a conversation with bell hooks that the heart of this misunderstanding lay in the fact that many audiences were introduced to unfamiliar information and images in the film (Dash and hooks 28). As a result, they felt as though they were in a "learning-teacher situation" (Dash and hooks 28). Adding to this, Dash stated:

> They immediately revert to being children in school, rather than adults who are being offered something they hadn't known before. I also think this is something that has to do with information about black people, people of color. When there is a layering of new information, it is thought to be a documentary presentation rather than a dramatic film with a whole lot of stuff in it that a lot of people just didn't know before. (Dash and hooks 28)

In response to this contradiction between representation and reception, hooks claims that while *Daughters* does indeed bring an eye to ethnographic detail, in the sense of Dash's attention to Gullah language, dress, food, and rituals, what ultimately sets it apart is the fact that it is actually set within a "poetic, mythic universe" (Dash and hooks 29). Much like Audre Lorde's "biomythography" *Zami: A New Spelling of My Name* (2003), Dash blends history, auto/biography, and myth to create a fiction that is founded in reality – and, in a way, a reality that is grounded in fiction. Dash herself would agree, claiming that *Daughters* is a kind of speculative fiction, a fiction that she considers grounded in the question of "what if" (Dash and hooks 29). For example, she ponders:

> *What if* we could have an unborn child come and visit her family-to-be and help solve the family's problems. *What if* we had a great-grandmother who could not physically make the journey north but who could send her spirit with them. *What if* we had a family that had such a fellowship with the ancestors that they helped guide them, and so on. (Dash and hooks 29; emphasis in original)

Much like Boyce Davies musings on "*but …*", Dash's "*what if*" offers a sense of mystery, of continuance, and of imagination. It signals the words between the lines, the stories that fill the margins, and the histories that yearn to be heard. It is a *what if* that is grounded in

both reality and in myth; a marker of the middle ground between fact and fiction that not only draws from both sides of story, but actually works to merge them – to blur, to bend, and to blend what is 'real' and what is 'imagined.' In this sense, fact and fiction become one, a playful narrative crossing that creates a story that is as much real as it is imagined. For what is one without the other? As Dash asks, "Without myth and tradition, what is there?" (Dash and hooks 29) While she does not include ellipses after her 'what if's', we might consider *Daughters* itself as an embodiment of ellipses – it is a story of continuation, a story that itself, continues. It is a story that is imagined, and in the process, brought into a new kind of reality.

Land and Landings

Central to the mythopoetic context of *Daughters* is the myth of the Ibo Landing. As Dash explains, "there are two myths and one reality" (Dash and hooks 29). The story involves African captives of the Ibo tribe (sometimes referred to as Igbo), who, when brought to the U.S. Sea Islands in 1803 and saw what the future held for them, collectively chose suicide over slavery. As an event both historical and mythical – and thus, a story that varies from telling to telling – I have chosen to refer to Dash's explanation, as told to bell hooks:

> There are accounts of them having walked into the water, and then on top of the water all the way back to Africa, you know, rather than live in slavery in chains. There are also myths of them having flown from the water, flown all the way back to Africa. And then there is the story – the truth or the myth – of them walking into the water and drowning themselves in front of the captors. I was able, in my

> research, to read some of the accounts from the sailors who were on the ship when supposedly it happened, and a lot of the shipmates, the sailors or other crew members, they had nervous breakdowns watching this. Watching the Ibo men and women and children in shackles, walking into the water and holding themselves under the water until they in fact drowned. (Dash and hooks 29-30)

While the Ibo Landing mass suicide shares similarities to the Zong massacre in terms of tragedy and trauma at the hands of slavery, it holds a different kind of place in the minds of many Black Americans. The Zong massacre was a slaughter undertaken by slave traders. The 'Ibo Landing Myth,' by contrast, while poignantly tragic, nevertheless, through its mythical retelling over the years, evokes a sense of hope in the form of resistance. But despite the differences of these encounters across the Middle Passage, Philip and Dash take similar approaches in how they approach and re-present these narratives. They each use a kind of mythopoetry rooted in both textual and oral histories to re-write those stories. In the process, they enact a different kind of remembrance that *engages* with the past, rather than merely *presents* it.

In her conversation with hooks, Dash points out another interesting finding from her research. While the Ibo Landing mass suicide occurred at a particular location along the Sea Islands in 1803, over the years, the actual place itself has become mythical. As she says: "I found that almost every Sea Island has a little inlet, or a little area where the people say, 'This is Ibo Landing. This is where it happened. This is where this thing really happened'" (Dash and hooks 30). There is thus a myth of reality, as well as a reality of myth (Brand, *Map to the Door* 19). Dash then ponders why it is that on every island, there is a place where people claim: "This is actually Ibo Landing" (Dash and

hooks 30). She suspects that, "It's because that message is so strong, so powerful, so sustaining to the tradition of resistance, by any means possible, that every Gullah community embraces this myth. So I learned that myth is very important in the struggle to maintain a sense of self and to move forward into the future" (Dash and hooks 30).

In a way, myth becomes history, and history itself becomes the setting for *Daughters* (Mellencamp, "Making History" 87). What is important to consider in relation to the myth of history, and the history of myth, is the significance of space and place. And examining the Ibo Landing in terms of space is crucial to appreciating the depth of narrative, of history, and of the characters' interior lives. The landscape of Ibo Landing is not merely a backdrop to the story, or a "catalyst to remembrance" (Jarvis 127), but rather it exists *as* a history, and in a way, as a character in its own right. In the film, Dash uses the music of African "talking drums" to give the sense of surrounding islands communicating with each other (Dash, "Script" 85; G. Tate, "Homegirl Goddesses" 72). The past, here, has a place of its own, and the place – a history (Jarvis 127).

Dash describes the Sea Islands as "the Ellis Island for Africans" (Dash, "Making *Daughters*" 6). These islands, which line the coasts of Georgia, South Carolina, and Florida, became the "main dropping off point for Africans" brought to the New World as part of the transatlantic slave trade (Dash, "Making *Daughters*" 6). As the processing point for the forced migration of countless Africans, it became a sort of Ellis Island, but without the illusions of an 'American dream.' After the abolition of slavery in the U.S., many descendants of these Africans – known as Gullah, or Geechee - remained on these islands, continuing to live and work off the land (Dash, "Making History" 6). Due in part to the isolation of the islands, the Gullah became known for having a distinct culture

rooted in the traditions of their West African ancestors (Alao 41-2; G. Tate, "Homegirl Goddessses" 72). This culture is not merely 'preserved' through physical isolation. Rather it is actively carried on through oral traditions which emphasize connection, community, and continuity: it is thus "re-created, recalled, recollected" (Mellencamp, "Making History" 87).

I would like to follow Patricia Mellencamp's lead here and consider *Daughters* in terms of Deleuze's "geography of relations" ("Making History" 90). According to Gilles Deleuze and Claire Parnet (1987), a "geography of relations" is a geography that prioritizes not what one *is*, but how one *becomes* (56; see also Mellencamp, "Making History" 90). Essentially, it can recall, or reveal, what has been hidden, ignored, or gone undocumented (Mellencamp, "Making History" 90). Geography, then, "is no less mental and corporeal than physical in movement" (Deleuze and Parnet 38). Maps become not just maps in the traditional cartographic sense, but "maps of intensities" (Deleuze and Parnet 38). They come to represent not just the physical world, but voyages, journeys, the "delirium" of flight (Deleuze and Parnet 38; see also Brand, *Map to the Door* 212; Goeman 168-70; McKittrick, "On Plantations" 949). *Daughters*, too, might represent a kind of alternative mapping. It offers us a map of Ibo Landing, but not necessarily *the* Ibo Landing. Dash is not concerned with documenting, tracing, or defining the lines of Ibo Landing on a page, but of conveying the experiences, the feelings, the thoughts, the sensations of this place through the film's frame. Like Brand's Door of No Return, the myth of Ibo Landing is not something that can be pinned down to one geographical place, but one that exists in a geography of relations – a geography of becomings. As Mellencamp points out, Dash focuses on "*becoming*, on *relations*, what happens *between*

experiences and thought, between 'sensation and ideas,' between sound and image, between cultures, between women ("Making History" 90; emphasis in original). Adding that, "This highlights the logic of 'and' – of connections, and of actions. Becomings 'are acts which can only be contained in a life and expressed in a style'" ("Making History" 90; see also Deleuze and Parnet 57-9). Indeed, Deleuze and Parnet write, "Things do not begin to live except in the middle" (Deleuze and Parnet 55). I would like to add further that related to this logic of "*and*," is Boyce Davies' logic of "*but …*", and for Dash, the "*what if …"*; it is a logic of the imagination that, in a way, defies logic in the process. But *Daughters* represents not just the logic of *and*, it represents the *experience* of 'and' through relations, connections, and creativity. 'And' suggests a kind of lateral connection, but what *Daughters* shows us is an endless ellipsis. An ellipsis of endless connections, becomings, and futures. In *Daughters*, Dash films history, geography, and the endless possibilities of the in-between.

This geography of relations is relevant to discourse in Black (feminist) geographies. In *Demonic Grounds: Black Women and the Cartographies of Struggle* (2006), Katherine McKittrick challenges the notion of a geography that is rooted in the fixed and physical (xi; see also Goeman 5; Massey 12-13; McDowell 31-32; Wynter 639-40). Much like Deleuze and Parnet, McKittrick is skeptical of the idea of space as "just *is*," even as she admits that this is, indeed, seductive (*Demonic Grounds* xi; emphasis added; see also Deleuze and Parnet 56; Goeman 16). The notion of space and place as "merely containers for human complexities and social relations" has a way of keeping our selfhood grounded; it stabilizes, normalizes, and arguably simplifies our sense of where we are – and therefore who we are (McKittrick, *Demonic Grounds* xi). McKittrick argues,

however, that this simplified perspective of space also simplifies the roles of race and gender within space (*Demonic Grounds*, xi). For example, the spaces associated with slavery, such as plantations and auction blocks, are often reduced to mere materiality in discourse which creates the illusion of containment and regulation (McKittrick, *Demonic Grounds* xii). Critiquing this, McKittrick examines the spatial complexity of the slave ship, writing, "it hides black humanity because it 'just is' and because those inside, bound to the walls, are neither seeable nor liberated subjects" (*Demonic Grounds*, xi). This is similar to Philip's archival encounter with the Zong slave ship's court case – legal documents of histories that considered Black bodies as mere cargo whose lives were seen only through an economic lens; bodies that are thus seen as placeless, or "ungeographic" (McKittrick, *Demonic Grounds* xiii; Philip *Zong!* 189-91). This "where" of Black geographies and subjectivities, as McKittrick suggests, is limited to categories, boundaries, and lines that are produced (and perpetuated) by *a priori* conceptions of space and place as bounded, stable, and unchanging (*Demonic Grounds* xi). McKittrick's attention to Black feminist geographies shows how "geography is not […] secure and unwavering" (*Demonic Grounds* xi). Rather, it is fluid, and based not only in the physical, but in the metaphoric, the subjective, and the linguistic. Geography lies in our hands, our language, and in our imagination.

The "poetics of landscape," a concept developed by Édouard Glissant (1992), does well to capture this fluidity and flexibility of space and place within Black geographies. In McKittrick's words, a "poetics of landscape" situates "saying, theorizing, feeling, knowing, writing, and imagining space and place" at the core of geography (McKittrick, *Demonic Grounds* xxi). Glissant contends that, "Describing the landscape is

not enough. The individual, the community, the land are inextricable in the process of creating history" (Glissant 105-6). Landscape is not just a distant other, but a character – a process (Glissant 106). It places equal value on both written and unwritten forms of geographic expression, ultimately expanding what it means to navigate and make sense of our spatialized and imagined worlds (McKittrick, *Demonic Grounds* xxi-xxii). According to Sylvia Wynter (1989), Glissant's poetics of landscape is a "counterconcept" that challenges geographic tools and traditions that would place "Man" at the center of a universal knowledge system (639). It is a concept that invites complexity to our understanding of not only space and place, but to how we understand space and place in relation to our *selves*, our communities, and our histories. For Glissant, poetics of landscape are also narratives of the land: they include poems, plays, theories – and as we might add here, films – which work to reveal the realities of Black women's spatiality and subjectivity (see also Goeman 15). The land, as Glissant understands it, is not just tangible, external to the self, but rather, exists *through* relations, *through* stories. This is where the "sayability" of geography comes into play; space and place, as both material and imagined, helps open up geography beyond the cartographic limitations of "Man's" heteropatriarchal traditions, to make 'space' for Black women's own geographic experiences (McKittrick, *Demonic Grounds* xxiii). In a way, it is this expressive and experiential geography (Mellencamp, "Making History" 77) – this geography of relations – that creates a mutual process of becoming between land, self, community, and history (McKittrick, *Demonic Grounds* xxii).

It is the oral, narrative tradition of Glissant's poetics that I believe truly resonates in Dash's *Daughters*. It is through the poetics of landscape that Black women in

particular are able to re-evaluate and rewrite the histories of slavery, the nation, and feminism through the reorienting of space, place, and our geographic epistemologies (McKittrick, *Demonic Grounds* xxiii-xxiv). And it the poetics of landscape – the blending of voice, body, and story with geography – that allows for the naming of place. This "naming of place" – through expressive geographies – is also a form of "naming the self and self-histories" (McKittrick, *Demonic Grounds* xxii). In other words, it is a process of self-definition through the reclamation of space and history (McKittrick, *Demonic Grounds* xxii; see also Hill Collins 100-2). If we consider, then, the Ibo Landing Myth described by Dash, we can see how the act of naming a place – "this is Ibo Landing" – is meant not only to mark a place on a map, but to flood a place with memory and history, a flood which resists the borders of a map, blurs the ink on a page, and fills one's body with remembrance. In the words of Glissant: "Our landscape is its own monument: its meaning can only be traced on the underside. It is all history" (11).

In fact, even within the film, Dash does not explicitly identify on which particular Sea Island the film takes place. In the opening, the setting is described rather elusively as "the Sea Islands of the South." Instead of situating the film in a specific place, Dash adheres to Gullah tradition by suggesting that this Ibo Landing could be on *any* Sea Island, on any inlet. As a result, we see how 'authenticity' is not only reserved for historical or geographic accuracy, but can also include the mythical and the poetic. Place, indeed, becomes a kind of fiction (Brand, *Map to the Door* 18). The poetics of place become just as integral – or perhaps more integral – to our geographic knowledge and navigation (Goeman 119). Through the mythical, Dash renders the islands unmappable in a way that re-centers the centrality of *relationships* – relationships between, and across,

selves, land, sea, and community. It is not just about the place on a map, but about the feeling, stories, and histories that are evoked in and through one's relationship to place; Dash is not concerned so much with the point on the map, but with the feelings of place, the poetics of the image, and the senses of the story.

Similarly, Dionne Brand challenges traditional geographic tools such as maps which perpetuate the illusion of being the 'only' way to map our land, our lives, and our worlds. In *A Map to the Door of No Return: Notes to Belonging,* Brand creatively blends autobiography, history, and myth to broaden our horizons of how we can make sense of our surroundings, and our selves. Through poetic language, she emphasizes the "'sayability' of geography"; surroundings, as McKittrick observes, become speakable (*Demonic Grounds* xxiii). In her rejection of land, of belonging to a nation – of an allegiance to a particular place as dictated by the arbitrariness of the lines on a map – Brand shows how "geography is always human and that humanness is always geographic – blood, bones, hands, lips, wrists, this is your land, your planet, your road, your sea …" (McKittrick, *Demonic Grounds* ix; see also Brand, *Map to the Door* 89; Goeman 120).

Dash brings a similar geographic approach to *Daughters*, by transforming the cartography of slavery, to the cartography of bodies. While mapping the land through the historical context of the Sea Islands, Dash brings a human element to that history by mapping slavery through the poetics of people and place. One of the most striking examples of this imaginative, expressive geography in *Daughters* is Dash's decision to portray Gulllah elders with their hands stained blue. On the Sea Islands, many slaves worked on indigo plantations, harvesting the coveted plant-based dye which would often leave their hands with a dark blue tint. Although Dash was aware that the indigo dye

would not have *permanently* stained the hands of slaves, Dash says that her decision to show the elders' hands stained blue was founded on fiction more than fact, or better yet, a hyperbolic blending of the two: as a "symbol of slavery" (Dash and hooks 31). Thus blue-stained hands became a poetic blurring of the relationship between body and land, and of the connections between past and present. She wanted to use blue indigo as an alternative visual embodiment of slave histories, something different from the more typical visual motifs of chains and scars (Dash and hooks 31; Dash and Baker 164; see also Sharpe 126).

This unfamiliar embodiment of history was also intended to stir emotions in the viewer; this defamiliarization draws attention to the persistence of an otherwise familiar past and, as bell hooks points out, the permanent imprinting of emotional wounds (Dash and hooks 31; see also Sheppard 241; G. Tate, "A Word" 69-70). Here, Dash worked to create images that were less about the horrors of slave histories, and more about how that "horrific institution" continues to haunt and shape the "interior lives of slaves and their descendants" (G. Tate, "A Word" 70; Sharpe 12-4, 126). It was not about *telling* history but rather *creating* history through a "mythic memory" that creatively blended fact and fiction, memory and myth (Dash and hooks 30). For Dash, it was a matter once again of the '*what if …' – What if* the elders' hands remained blue from their days working the land as slaves? *What if* there was a bodily representation of the history of slavery? *What if* we could see, could feel, the history of slavery through the body, both through characters in the film, and through viewers taking it all in?

The blue indigo represents a kind of re-mapping – of the body, of land, and of history. With the blue indigo, Dash harnessed her imagination in a way that considered

the geography of relations, and the poetics of landscape, as integral to expressing the ways in which Black individuals and communities felt, heard, saw, touched, and imagined their surroundings, both material and mythical.

We first see this blue indigo in the opening scene of the film, which shows a close-up of the blue-stained hands of a young Nana Peazant holding the Sea Island soil. From the very beginning, the blue indigo represents a *break* (Dash and Baker 164). A break from typical representations of slavery, a break from fact-based histories and geographies, and a break from the boundaries that have come to define more traditional geographic perspectives. The blue exists, even in its permanence, in the in-between. As the grains of soil – the dust – blow from young Nana Peazant's hands, the lines become blurred between past and present, self and ancestor, and body and land.

In addition to the symbolic significance of blue indigo, this opening scene demonstrates a poetics of landscape, and a 'geography of the heart,' much like bell hooks does in her book *Belonging: A Culture of Place* (2009). In her chapter titled, "Touching the Earth," hooks remembers with fondness how, as a child, she would play in the soil of her Kentucky home (*Belonging* 34). With this memory, she makes connections between the land and her ancestors. She writes:

> When we love the earth, we are able to love ourselves more fully. I believe this. The ancestors taught me it was so […] Before I understood anything about the pain and exploitation of the southern system of sharecropping, I understood that grown-up black folks loved the land. (hooks, *Belonging* 34)

She suggests that it is through time that Black folks have lost a "sense of history" (*Belonging* 36); living in "modern society" has caused a kind of "cultural amnesia"

around the centrality of the agrarian south upon the lives of their ancestors, especially at the turn of the century (Dash and hooks 36; G. Tate, "A Word" 71). Living as farmers, or else being closely connected to the land, allowed Black communities to experience a sense of independence, power, and well-being (hooks, *Belonging* 36). Glissant similarly suggests that, "The relationship with the land, one that is even more threatened because the community is alienated from the land, becomes so fundamental in this discourse that landscape in the work stops being merely decorative or supportive and emerges as a full character" (105).

hooks also identifies a similarity between this respect for, and connection with, the land to experiences amongst Indigenous groups. Noting the ways in which Black and Indigenous populations shared methods of cultivating the land with each other, she suggests "sharing the reverence for the earth, black and red people helped one another remember that, despite the white man's ways, the land belonged to everyone" (*Belonging* 35). Respecting the land thus acts as a reminder of the very arbitrariness of borders (Brand, *Map to the Door* 18; Goeman 171) - borders that delineate between nations, states, 'home,' and 'foreign' lands, and who gets to 'belong' within those elusive lines.

Interestingly, *Daughters* offers similar connections between Black and Indigenous cultures through representations of the land. As hooks points out in conversation with Dash, "*Daughters* tries to recover the idea that, despite the material hardship that led people to go north or move into the industrialized city, black people did that at a loss" (Dash and hooks 46). She continues by suggesting that the strongest marker for this loss of land is through the character St. Julian Last Child, the last remaining Native American on the island (Dash and hooks 46). Last Child is the romantic interest of Iona Peazant, a

young woman torn between joining her family on their journey north and staying on the island with her love. Early in the film, Iona finds a letter written by Last Child, which she reads while going through her "scraps of memories," which include pieces of Native American jewelry made for her by her admirer (Dash, "Script" 88). In the screenplay to the film, Dash includes margin notes clarifying this detail: "Scraps of memories … through them we came to know our mothers, grandmothers, and family history. And finally to know our own selves …" (Dash, "Script" 88). In this journey north, what historians have dubbed 'the Great Migration,' Iona finds herself stuck in the in-between – between home and away, between the past and future, and between self and family. If she moves, she will 'lose' her home, her land, and her lover. If she remains, she will 'lose' her family, and the promises of a future of 'progress.' It is with these "scraps of memories" that she can hold onto her personal and ancestral history, materially and metaphorically, no matter what choice she makes.

> Returning to the letter, she reads Last Child's tender words; his plea:
>
> Iona, with the greatest respect for yourself, and the Peazant family, I beg that you stay by my side here on this island. Please do not leave me in this flood of migration North. […] Consider the memories that we share of growing up together. We are the young, the eager up from slavery […] Iona, as I walk towards the future, with your heart embracing mine, everything seems new, everything seems good, everything seems possible. Signed, St. Julian Last Child. Son of the Cherokee Nation, Son of these islands we call Dahtaw [Gullah for "Daughter Island"], Coosa, Edisto, Sapelo, Dafuski, Ossabaw, Kiwa, Wassaw, Paris and Santa Helena. (Dash, "Script" 88-91)

With this letter we see the imagery of the migration as a flood, hearkening back to Morrison's 'flooding memory' as well as to the potential of reclaiming the space of the Sea Islands from its history in slavery, and to the possibilities of a future filled with love and freedom. While Iona is told that the family must "leave together," Last Child's letter suggests that something else, something deeper, will be lost by going north (Dash, "Script" 46). While Dash wanted to "speak to the condition of being African American in the Sea Islands at the turn of the century," she also wanted to highlight the Indigenous presence on the islands – something that is often left out narratives of the Old South (Dash and hooks 46; see also Goeman 148). She writes:

> [T]here were very few Native Americans left in the Sea Islands at that time because … they had all been marched to the reservations in Oklahoma. The Cherokees were some of the original inhabitants of the Sea Islands. So I thought it was important to have one remaining Native American there … I think in any type of situation where people are forced off the land, there is always some family, some group that stays back, and I see [Last Child's] family as having held back and him the lone survivor. (Dash and hooks 46)

Here we may think about the hauntological aspect of space – of the spectral quality of an absent presence (Derrida 10). Last Child's resistance to northern migration acts as a reclamation of space. Considering the historical presence of Indigenous peoples on the Sea Island, before forced migration to reservations on the mainland, the physical presence of Last Child represents the perpetual hauntings of history that continue to exist through memory and myth.

And while Last Child works to (re)claim the space of the island, his presence also acts as a reclamation of the screen. While hooks notes that in her conversations with others there were questions raised about whether the film's representation conforms to the "stock Hollywood image" of the stoic Native, she suggests herself that *Daughters* actually works to "subvert the traditional image" (Dash and hooks 47). As she claims, up until *Daughters*, "We have never seen a film by a black filmmaker that tried to portray any aspect of Native American culture" (Dash and hooks 49). She argues that Dash actually challenges stereotypes of illiteracy by providing Last Child with some of the most profound lines in the film through the vehicle of the love letter, adding complexity and depth of character to an otherwise small role (Dash and hooks 47). The presence of Last Child adds complexity to the film's narrative, as well as to the broader perception of how Black and Native American histories and cultures are connected. Together with Iona, the couple represents the possibilities of love through cultural crossings and longings – a unification between those who have been historically absent from the screen. Their determination to remain on the island is not only a rebellion against (forced) migration, but a rebellion for their right to the land and to the 'self'. For example, Last Child's naming of each of the Sea Islands in his love letter to Iona, may be interpreted as an act of "naming of place," and thus, an act of naming the self (McKittrick, *Demonic Grounds* xxii). To (re)claim space is to (re)claim the self. Once victims of the violence of historical and cinematic (mis)representation, their presence on the island parallels the work of Dash, and other members of the L.A. Rebellion, to make visible what was once invisible. The power of the image – a "vindication through visibility," as Clyde Taylor calls it

("Preface" xviii) – allows Last Child and Iona, as well as Dash, to reclaim the right to space, place, and self-definition.

It is important to note that we also see a similar, if more subtle representation of Indigenous histories in the beginning of Dash's earlier film, *Illusions*, in which Mignon, the protagonist, reads a telegram about Navajo codebreakers during WWII (which I analyzed further in Chapter 3). Determined to share such an important yet largely underappreciated part of the war effort with audiences across the country, she optimistically pitches the story to her boss. However, he quickly shuts down Mignon's idea, telling her it is not in line with the view of the "America" that Hollywood wished to propagate. In other words, Hollywood produces films *for* Americans, but it is Hollywood who gets to decide what it is they *can* see. Despite fighting for the country overseas, the Navajo were not viewed as representative of the nation, and so their story was mostly excluded from Hollywood's war films. This not only kept audiences from seeing certain stories and images on the silver screen, but it offered a view of the nation that is founded on the illusion of what it means to be American, and what it means to belong.

Just under ten years after the release of *Illusions*, Dash lived up to the promise of her film ancestor, Mignon, by telling these stories of 'others' – of both Black women and the Indigenous peoples who have lived on this 'American' land long before Hollywood could dictate what in fact, constituted 'American.' While it may be a fine line between reproducing romanticized images of Native American, or Black American culture as 'one with nature' on the one hand, and as hooks puts it, speaking to the "truth of that spirit" on the other (Dash and hooks 48), what Dash does with *Daughters* might best be understood as a recovering – or a rewriting – of history (Dash and hooks 46). As hooks points out, in

the preoccupation with 'fitting' in to specific identity categories, many people have overlooked the historical overlaps between different racial and ethnic groups in the U.S. She says, "To some extent we have bought into the white-supremacist notion that we have no connection to Native Americans … Many of us were made to feel that we were denying blackness if we claimed that connection" (Dash and hooks 49). *Daughters* helps highlight those historical and cultural connections through a material and metaphoric common ground between Last Child and the Peazant family – through the physical space of the Sea Islands, as well as the broader spatial experiences of nature, spirituality, and cultural (dis)location.

In Last Child's love letter to Iona, he describes the migration north as a "flood." Again, we see the power of water as a metaphor, carrying on themes demonstrated in Toni Morrison's "Site of Memory" (2008) as well as in the works of other Black and diasporic writers (Brand, *Map to the Door* 7-12; Philip, *Zong!* 203). With the imagery of a flood, we are given the impression of a great force, of movement, of drastic change, and perhaps too, of damage. Indeed, Last Child views migration as a loss – a loss of land, of place, of family, and of tradition.

In a way, Nana Peazant, the matriarch of the family, shares many of these same concerns. In the scene following Iona's reading of the love letter, we find Nana and Eli Peazant in the family graveyard. Nana, the elderly matriarch of the family, is resolute in her decision to live the remainder of her life on the island. Meanwhile, Eli, her great-grandson is planning to make the move north with the rest of the Peazant family. He reassures Nana, "Just because we're crossing over to the mainland, it doesn't mean that we don't love you. It doesn't mean we're not going to miss you" (Dash, "Script" 92).

Nana, with her blue-stained hands, clears weeds from a grave as she says to Eli, "It's up to the living to keep in touch with the dead, Eli. Man's power doesn't end with death. We just move on to a new place, a place where we watch over our living family …" (Dash, "Script" 93). Death, here, does not signify loss so much as connection; death carries one into the place of the ancestors, a place that reinforces the sense of family and connection. As Nana observes, "The ancestors and the womb … they're one, they're the same … Those in this grave, like those who're across the sea, they're with us. They're all the same" (Dash, "Script" 94).

This use of a graveyard setting is reminiscent of the telephone booth scene in *Illusions* – which I discuss further in Chapter 3 – in which Mignon finds solace by speaking to her mother on the phone. Here, the telephone cord is likened to an umbilical cord, much like in *Daughters*, the ancestors – through their graves – are likened to a mother's womb. Both connote a sense of connection, even through distance and absence. However, this is not a one-way connection. Like the telephone, it represents a reciprocal relationship: between mother and child, between self and other – between life, and a life beyond. The ancestors offer a connection that stretches beyond space, time, and the corporeal body.

Eli and Nana continue to debate the value of tradition, and the promise of progress. Nana pleads with Eli to "never forget who we are, and how far we've come" when he moves North (Dash, "Script" 96). She adds:

> There's a thought … a recollection … something somebody remembers. We carry these memories inside of us. Do you believe that hundreds and hundreds of Africans brought here on this other side would forget everything they once knew?

We don't know where the recollections come from. Sometimes we dream them. But we carry these memories inside of us. (Dash, "Script" 96)

Echoing Morrison, Nana Peazant understands remembrance as a bodily experience – a flooding of memory, and a sea of dreams, both 'real' and 'imagined', or something in-between.

Eli, however, is uncertain that he can hold on to these memories through his journey, that he can carry them over to the mainland. He is losing faith in this country he calls home – a country which seems to deny the presence of African histories across the sea, and a history which once saw, as Eli points out, Black men and women as kings and queens, rulers of their own cities. Nana tries to restore confidence and spirituality to her great-grandson, asking him to "Call on those old Africans … Let them touch you with the hands of time. Let them feed your head with wisdom that ain't from this day and time" (Dash, "Script" 97). Sternly, she adds, "Because when you leave this island, Eli Peazant, you ain't going to no land of milk and honey" (Dash, "Script" 97).

Although Nana Peazant warns the family about this migration, the lure of modernity eventually outweighs their ties to tradition, and the Peazants continue to prepare for their journey north. Early in the film, we see women go through boxes and baskets which contain "scraps of memories" – items that piece together the history of their lives – while the Peazant men draw out a map of the routes they will take north (Dash, "Script" 86-7). Near them, the family's hairbraider styles a young woman's hair using the pattern of the map as inspiration. As Dash writes in the script notes, "she creates a hairstyle that is a map of their migration north by parting, sectioning and braiding an elaborate hair design" (Dash, "Script" 87). Understanding the purpose behind these braids

gives us a glimpse into a powerful and beautifully intimate demonstration of migration and diaspora, which might otherwise go overlooked by audiences as a mere everyday aesthetic practice. Hair becomes a map in itself, a representation of the journey the Peazant family will soon take. The map thus becomes embodied. First, we see it created through the hands of not one man, but several men working *together* to determine the best roads and trails to guide them. Then, we see the twists and turns of this life-changing journey mapped onto a woman's hair. Stories here, exist not only through words, but through the 'sayability of geography,' and the cartography of bodies.

This alternative kind of mapping, as a creative, collaborative process, reveals how even the cartographer's lines create corporeal effects. It is also important to note that alternative mapping practices have a particular significance for Black geographies in particular, as histories of bondage required individuals, both before and after slavery, to understand and chart their worlds without access to traditional cartographic tools (McKittrick, "On Plantations" 949). This led to the creation of maroon maps, literacy maps, family maps, and music maps, alongside more 'typical' maps (McKittrick, "On Plantations" 949). Maps, in this sense, represent not only destinations, but journeys (Brand, *Map to the Door* 203): physical journeys across water and land, and also the spiritual, cultural, and emotional journeys of the self. In this sense, as a geography of self, we might also consider maps as markers of growth, of "intensities" (Deleuze and Parnet 38). Not fixed, but ever-changing. In the words of McKittrick, "mapping is not linear; it does not simply rest on either African-ness […] or black US routes to 'freedom' […] Instead, geography speaks through bodies. It is on the body that the complexity and ambiguity of history, race, racism and place are inscribed" ("Who Do You" 225).

Dash's cinematic use of hairbraiding shows the significance of community and connection upon the choices we make and the paths we take. The decision to move to the industrial north was a collective decision, albeit a contentious one for the Peazant family. Preparations for the move were also collaborative, as we see with the map making, the cooking, and the collecting of "scraps of memories." But it is also about the emotional, cultural, and ancestral connections that help compose one's life. In *Daughters*, Dash strips away the veil of silence and of stereotype, and offers us a deep, complex, view of Black women's subjectivities.

Roots, Rerouting, and Rewriting

Dionne Brand writes, "To live in the Black Diaspora is I think to live as a fiction – a creation of empires, and also self-creation" (*Map to the Door* 18). Dash demonstrates this ambiguity of nation, place, and self well through her representation of the northern migration in *Daughters*. While the majority of the family may have been hoping for a better life in the industrial north, Nana Peazant – the beacon of spirituality and tradition – knew that it would not be the land of progress that was promised to them. Near the end of the film, before the family's departure, Nana performs a spiritual ritual, called "A Root Revival of Love" (Dash, "Script" 158). She adds a lock of hair from her mother to the "memory bundle," called a "hand" (Dash, "Script" 159; Machiorlattie 107). Often times, when born into slavery, African children would be separated from their mothers, and all a mother could do was leave a lock of her hair in the baby's swaddling (Machiorlattie 107). Memory thus exists in the body, and body, in a way, exists in memory. During her ritual of remembrance, Nana says to the family members gathered around:

> There must be a bond … a connection, between those that go North, and those who cross the sea. A connection. We are as two people, in one body. The last of the old, and the first of the new. We will always live this double life, you know, because we're from the sea. We came here in chains, and we must survive … there's salt in our blood. (Dash, "Script" 151)

"One is born into history, one isn't born into a void," Dionne Brand reminds us (*Map to the Door* 82). We are all implicated in the lives and histories before us. And still, "nations, like narratives, lose their origins in the myths of time and only fully realize their horizon's in the mind's eye" (Bhabha 1). Although Dash had difficulty unearthing the stories of her family, it was through the poetics of place, memory, and imagination that she could stitch together the stories that had unraveled over time. Reflecting on *Daughters*, Greg Tate suggests that it marks the "ambivalent quest for worldly experience and a sense of ancestral place" experienced by many Black Americans ("A Word" 71). On the absence of such national narratives, Tate adds, "it is […] slavery that transformed African people into American products, enforcing cultural amnesia that scraped away details without obliterating the core" ("A Word" 71). It is thus slavery that created that hyphenated, haunting space between 'African' and 'American.' Tate further suggests that Black, or African-Americans, "remain in a middle passage, living out an identity that is neither African nor American, though we crave for both shores to claim us" ("A Word" 71). As a poetic interpretation of life in the middle passage, Dash's film works to fill – to reclaim – the haunting space between these shores of place and identity. Through her (re)writing of history, her narrative becomes a form of reparation through the (un)telling of the stories that refuse to be told (Hartman 10; Philip, *Zong!* 194). The film itself may

be interpreted as "a kind of family album" (G. Tate, "A Word" 71; see also Cixous and Calle-Gruber 179) – an assemblage of characters, each representing a unique set of beliefs, fears, desires, and longings. And it is through this album that Dash is able to reframe her own experiences, and to retrace her ancestral connections across time and space.

At the same time, the significance of community and connection upon the Peazant's lives should not be confused with conformity. At the last minute, Iona decides to stay with her lover, St. Julian Last Child. Running from the family's departing boat and into Last Child's embrace, she rides off towards the horizon on horseback – a romantic ending that represents a new beginning, not only for the couple, but also for the future of both Black and Native American people in film. Yellow Mary, too, decides to stay on the island with Nana and Eula Peazant, Eli's partner who is pregnant with the "Unborn Child," who is expected to be born shortly after the Peazant family departs the island. Just as Nana prepares for her own spiritual departure from the world – "her flowers to bloom in a distant frontier" (Dash, "Script" 80) – we have the Unborn Child waiting to join in this ancestral circle. The rest of the Peazants, who have chosen to carry on with their journey north, "are leaving their personal history and entering upon the larger history of the African diaspora" (Dash, "The Script" 163). And so, ancestral community and connection will continue to shape the land and lives on the Sea Islands, as new memories are made through remembering the old. Once we understand life to be "a process on a continuum or circle," memory becomes "redemptive and regenerative" (Machiorlattie 109). Although they are growing apart, both spatially and spiritually, the Peazant family –

and by association, Dash and her family – remain united through the unbreakable bonds of (hi)story, myth, and memory – through the continuous circle of ancestral connection.

Conclusion:

A Lifetime of Stories to Tell: Towards a Future of Black Feminist Filmmaking

My story begin on de eve of my family migration Nort.
My story begin … befo A was born.
The Unborn Child (Ronald Daise, "Gullah Translation" 167)

In the final scene of *Daughters of the Dust*, we see the Peazant family parting ways – torn between modernity and tradition, family and prosperity, past and future. Most members of the family stick to their plans to move north, despite the sacrifices it requires. Haagar, for example, weeps when she realizes the cost of her journey, as "paid to the old souls" will be leaving behind her daughter, Iona, who rides off on horseback with her love, St. Julian Last Child (Dash, "Script" 164). In addition to Iona, the family members who decide to remain on the island are: Nana Peazant, Eula, Eli, and Yellow Mary. While the narration in *Daughters* alternates between the voices of Nana Peazant and the Unborn Child, it is the latter who offers the final words of the film:

> My Momma and Daddy stayed behind with Yellow Mary. Some say Eli got himself all involved with the anti-lynching issue. Some say Eula saw too much of herself in Nana Peazant, and wanted her children born on this island. They say Mama was always peculiar and Nana's roots and herbs set her off. All I know is, I was born here before Nana passed on. (Dash, "Script" 164)

The Unborn Child recounts how her parents, Eula and Eli, remained on the island with Nana Peazant and Yellow Mary, determined to carry on the Gullah way of life through their soon-to-be-born daughter. While the Unborn Child speaks off screen, Nana Peazant, Eula, and Yellow Mary walk together across the coastline, their figures silhouetted

against the white, sandy beach and the blue, glistening waters of their Sea Island home. And then, just as the women walk out of the film's frame, the Unborn Child enters, running in slow motion along the beach as she tries to catch up with her family. The Unborn Child continues her narration in voiceover: "We remained behind, growing older, wiser, stronger" (Dash, "Script" 164). The presence of the Unborn Child marks an ending – to the film, and to the family's life on the Sea Island – but she also marks a beginning. The beginning of a future filled with hope and promise, always guided by the ancestors. Even as time passes, and places change, the stories of these women will carry on even after the film fades to black.

Seeing the Unseen

In her book, *Daughters of the Dust: The Making of an African American Woman's Film* (1992), Dash reveals that she did not conceive of the Unborn Child character until after she herself became a mother. While she was still writing the script in 1984, Dash gave birth to her daughter, N'zinga. It was this life-changing experience that helped inspire a new way of thinking about the film. She writes:

> Her birth revealed to me the need to see the past as connected to the future. The story had to show hope, as well as the promise that tradition and family and life would always sustain us, even in the middle of dramatic change. N'zinga's arrival in our lives also brought the 'unborn child' into the script. I hadn't seen her until I saw my own daughter. (Dash, "Making *Daughters*" 6)

In a way, the narrative presence of the Unborn Child – both cinematically and autobiographically – is emblematic of Dash's two pivotal films, *Illusions* and *Daughters*

of the Dust. Dash's reflection on the Unborn Child helps illuminate the themes prominent in both works: the symbiotic relationship between our pasts and our futures; the mutable presence of the self through memory and myth; and the centrality of community and connection in Black American narratives. Indeed, just as Dionne Brand writes, "I cannot unhappen history and neither can my characters," (*Map to the Door*, 203), Dash too, shows how contemporary bodies continue to grapple with the hauntings of history. Through her (re)writing of U.S. history – through the setting of 1940s Hollywood in *Illusions*, and the northern migration of the early 1900s in *Daughters of the Dust* – Dash shows how the traumas of slavery extend across time, across seas, and across borders. Furthermore, she demonstrates how these histories persist through our memories, our bodies, and our stories – both real and imagined.

Although Dash's work is not autobiographical in the traditional sense of the genre – her films do not recount her personal life, fusing a singular 'self' with the protagonist – if we expand our view of the autobiography beyond these categorical, literary borders, we can see how life seeps into the screen, and the screen, too, seeps into life. By turning to the works of Black women writers, such as Audre Lorde, Dionne Brand, and Toni Morrison, we can see how the story of the self exists not in isolation, but in relation to others – through family, community, and ancestral connection. By telling the story of a community, as Dash does through her complex narratives of Black female subjectivity, the "I" becomes blurred with the "We" (Morrison, "Rootedness" 57; Quintanales 146-7; Spry 83). And it is this notion of "we" that is particularly important in auto/biographical narratives involving difficult histories, such as the history of slavery in the United States (Goeman 145; Perreault and Kadar 5). As Perreault and Kadar (2005) write, "Texts, in

these cases, may exist only as traces, echoes, or chilling formal documents. The only way through to these lives is via 'difficult knowledges,' a process of intellectual, emotional, and ethical engagement that exerts enormous demands on the reader" (6). As writers Marlene NourbeSe Philip, Saidiya Hartman, and Dionne Brand demonstrate, it is through the imagination – through the fragment, the margins, and the myths – that we may speak the unspeakable, to work towards the reparation of our haunted histories. By placing Dash's films in conversation with these Black women writers, we can see how Dash similarly works to critique, and reconcile, the "fragmented Black body of narrative" through a poetic, cinematic rendering and (re)writing of personal, ancestral, and national histories (Brand, "*Ars Poetica*" 60).

When searching for the stories and histories that would eventually shape her first feature film, *Daughters of the Dust*, Dash was similarly faced with the 'traces' and 'chilling formal documents' of difficult histories. Although she was determined to tell the story of her family's history, her family's refusal to talk about it left Dash with more questions than answers. As a result, Dash had to rely on the information found in archival documents to learn more about her Gullah heritage, using these traces of history to help piece together her own fragmented memories and imagined stories. It was through the imagination – through an act of speculative history – that Dash was able to bridge the narrative gaps created by more dominant national narratives, and to fill the 'echoes' of silence propelled by these difficult histories. Indeed, as Dash's imagining of the Unborn Child shows, the story of the self is both a fiction and a reality – it merges the two through a creative blending of biography, myth, and memory (Dash and hooks 28-9). It is not about simply digging up the past, but about engaging with it critically, ethically, and

creatively. Just as Clyde Taylor (2015) describes Julie Dash and other members of the L.A. Rebellion as achieving "vindication through visibility" (xviii), so too might we consider the (re)writing of history as a form of restitution through (self-)representation. As Dash writes of the Unborn Child, it is about finding hope through connections across time, place, and communities.

In a way, the Unborn Child in *Daughters of the Dust* is not unlike Mignon, the protagonist in *Illusions*. Both exist as an absent presence, and a present absence. While the Unborn Child is spectral in nature, a soon-to-be-being that helps guide the Peazant family through their geographic and emotional journeys, Mignon exists fully, corporeally. However, she is not seen for her true self – a Black woman working in the film industry – but rather, is merely assumed to be a white woman. "They see me, but they don't know who I am," Mignon says to Ester, the first character in the film to acknowledge her existence as a Black woman. Although she is corporeally present, Mignon still feels absent. In this sense, both Mignon and the Unborn Child exist as the 'unseen' – as an absent presence.

It is this notion of the unseen that acts as a thread throughout Dash's life and work. If the Unborn Child was inspired by the birth of her daughter, then we might consider Mignon, as a Black woman fighting for her right to representation, as similarly influenced by Dash's own experiences in the film industry. After all, as Mignon claims, "People make films about themselves." As I discuss in Chapter 3, this quote may be interpreted as a commentary on the underrepresentation of Black (women) filmmakers in the United States. However, if we consider Mignon's words in the context of Dash, as writer and director of the film, this phrase takes on a new meaning. With filmmakers like

Dash now reclaiming the tools of representation and redefining the images on our screens, we can consider Mignon's words as more of a declaration: a declaration towards self-definition, and towards a future of feminist filmmaking that values the vision, skills, and stories of Black women.

Considering the idea that "people make films about themselves," we might view Mignon herself as a stand in for Dash (Ryan, "Outing" 1322; Mellencamp, "Making History" 83). Furthermore, we might consider *Daughters of the Dust* as the kind of film Mignon aspires to make. After all, at the end of *Illusions*, Mignon asserts that she will fight to bring the narratives of marginalized 'Others' to the screen. As she says, "For there are many stories to be told, and many battles to begin." In this sense, just as the Unborn Child is a descendent of Dash's reality and imagination, Dash herself may be viewed as a descendent of Mignon (Mellencamp "Making History" 83).

From the self in history (Chapter 2), the self in story (Chapter 3), and the self in place (Chapter 4), Dash's presence as a filmmaker demonstrates how film is a powerful medium through which to merge myth, memory, and auto/biography through the (re)writing of personal, ancestral, and national histories. And just as the final scenes of both *Illusions* and *Daughters of the Dust* suggest – with Mignon vowing to tell the untold stories in the face of an oppressive industry, and the Unborn Child offering hope for the future in the face of dislocation – the 'self' is an ongoing narrative. It does not finish with the story's 'end,' rather it carries on beyond the pages, and beyond the frame (Boyce Davies 152-3).

"All autobiography is […] by its very nature an unfinished story," Alison Easton writes (177). As Mignon vows to change the film industry through a revolution in

representation, this conclusion marks a beginning as much as an ending – it is the end of the film, but the beginning of change. With the open-endedness of *Illusions*, it becomes the responsibility of the audience, of "we" the viewers, to not only imagine the possibilities of our film futures, but to incite that change where possible. Similarly, the ethereal, absent presence of the Unborn Child at the close of *Daughters of the Dust* shows us that the ending is only the beginning. Not only will the lives of the Peazant family continue to change as they navigate this new, industrial world, but new life will offer hope for a 'stronger' and 'wiser' future. As I discussed in Chapter 4, Dash uses the question of "what if" to guide the myth, history and poetics of her narratives. "What if we could have an unborn child come and visit her family-to-be and help solve the family's problems," Dash muses (Dash and hooks 29). However, we might also suggest that, with the open-endedness of these two films, Dash is encouraging audiences to similarly ask *themselves*: "What if?"

What if the stories that refuse to be told, could be told a different way? ***What if*** we remembered our 'forgotten' histories? ***What if*** we could speak our geographies, and feel our histories? ***What if*** a film could map our land, our bodies, our *selves*? ***What if*** we touched the earth, and what if a film touched us? ***What if …***

A Lifetime of Stories to Tell

"We have a lifetime of stories to tell," Julie Dash claims (qtd. in Bastien). Despite her pivotal role in the Black independent film movement known as the L.A. Rebellion, and the success of her revolutionary film, *Daughters of the Dust*, Julie Dash has since struggled to secure financing for new projects. As I discussed in Chapter 2, Dash believes

this is an issue of both race and gender. She says in an interview with film scholar Michael T. Martin:

> While black filmmakers have progressed, we have a long way to go […] I don't know how to say it nicely; it's not about us […] who's deciding on which films will be made and which will not? What kinds of films are being made and why? Who is the audience? Are we still just performing for white audiences? (Martin, "I Do Exist" 5)

While more films are being made with Black actors in prominent roles, Dash suggests that there is still a disparity in the kinds of stories being told, questioning who it is that decides what audiences get to see. Although she has pitched countless scripts to almost every major movie studio since the release of *Daughters of the Dust*, she suspects it is the decidedly Black feminist style of her filmmaking that makes studio executives uneasy (Martin, "I Do Exist" 4; Redding and Brownworth 191). Dash says of her first feature film, "It clearly frightens most white males and they are the ones who get to say what kind of audience is out there for a *Daughters of the Dust*. They don't understand it for the most part and don't want to say that they don't" (qtd. in G. Tate, "Homegirl Goddesses" 78). Dash describes how, even twenty years after *Daughters'* release, producers continue to treat her film like a "skeleton in [her] closet," despite the fact that it was embraced by many in the Black American community (Martin, "I Do Exist" 4). It appears that Dash is living the reality of her 'film ancestor' Mignon; Mignon's attempt to revolutionize the stories coming out of Hollywood in 1942 foreshadows Dash's own experience with *Daughters* in 1991.

Although Dash wasn't working within the mainstream film industry, she still had to navigate the primarily white-dominated venues of cinema when it came time to finance new projects. She writes:

> One of the ongoing struggles of African American filmmakers is the fight against being pushed, through financial and social pressure, into telling only one kind of story […] We have so many, many stories to tell. It will greatly enrich American filmmaking and American culture if we tell them. (Dash, "Making *Daughters*" 25)

As a filmmaker, Dash considers it a priority to stay true to herself, refusing to "manipulate" the stories of her own culture for the sake of mainstream cinematic expectations (Martin, "I Do Exist" 4). "I always return to the black aesthetic," she says, "That's how I sort out and resolve my problems – from a black aesthetic and from a woman's aesthetic point of view" (qtd. in Martin, "I Do Exist" 8). When asked about what kinds of films she would like to see in the future of Black American filmmaking, she says, "I want there to be more of every type of film you can imagine. I want to be able to see us in Middle Earth. We don't get to go beyond certain boundaries" (qtd. in Martin, "I Do Exist" 11). But she suggests that if we wish to really revolutionize the stories on our screens, what is needed is "financing from outside sources," such as independent producers, to help destabilize the financial dominance of mainstream movie studios (qtd. in Martin, "I Do Exist" 4). "We need more people telling our stories," Dash states, echoing Mignon's final words in *Illusions*, "and telling them the way they ought to be told" (qtd. in Bastien).

The Past and Future Merge to Meet Us Here

In June 1991, before the theatrical release of *Daughters*, Greg Tate asked Dash how she expected her film to fit into the world of cinema. Dash responded, "I think it's a timeless piece, not something that's trendy for right now […] It's like a balm. I think people will look at it 10, 20 years from now and discover new things and new emotions in it. You won't be able to do that with a whole lot of other films" (qtd. in G. Tate, "Homegirl Goddesses" 78). While *Daughters* was generally well-received by audiences in 1991, Dash's prediction that her film will continue to affect audiences years later certainly came true.

The renaissance of Dash through Beyoncé's visual album, *Lemonade* in 2016 certainly speaks to the film's timelessness. Much like a 'balm,' Dash's film continues to nurture and heal audiences to this day. Just as the work of Black women writers influenced Dash's cinematic aspirations, now Dash's work continues to inspire the next generation of Black artists and storytellers. As Michael Boston (2017) writes, "the links between those early Dash days and now are more than theoretical." Much like Joanne Braxton's "magic circle" of Black women writers (1), and Lorde's matrilineal diaspora (Chinosole 135-7), Dash and Beyoncé enter a circle of artists, a space of creative connection between Black women, across time and place (Boston). To recall Beyoncé's lyrics from *Lemonade*: "The past and future merge to meet us here." Not only do Beyoncé and Dash merge through their visual, artistic connections – through costumes, settings, and themes – but through their respective works, we see how the history of slavery merges with contemporary Black experiences. For both Beyoncé and Dash, history exists not in a separate past, but continues to resonate through contemporary bodies, emotions,

and places. It is through the very presence of Black women upon the cartographic and cinematic landscape – "an 'impossible black place'" (Simmons) – that they work to reclaim the narrative of history. The past and future collapse into one, taking us into the complex space of Black feminist subjectivities.

On her newfound connection to Beyoncé, Dash claims, "There's a continuum of song, of manner, motor habits that went undercover for a while because everyone was trying to integrate and be part of the melting pot […] You don't need to be in the melting pot. Why melt?" (qtd. in Boston) Dash is speaking here not only to the connection across generations of Black women artists and thinkers, but to the illusory absence of Black women in media. Reflecting on the narrow narrative space held open for Black Americans in mainstream cinema, she says:

> Where's our magic? We're not allowed this magic, this space to explore. How do you grow up to be a full human being? I didn't have that space when I was growing up. I knew that you couldn't be this, you couldn't be that. So, many of us don't even try. And the result can be disastrous. (qtd. in Martin, "I Do Exist" 11)

When she was a young girl growing up in Queens, she did not realize she could become a filmmaker because she did not see Black women in that role. "You want to go to a movie and recognize people from your community, or from your family, or anything," she says, "And that wasn't happening with me prior to this […] there was no connection" (qtd. in Felsenthal). It was not until Dash was offered the opportunity to use a movie camera, and shoot her own films, that she realized she could actually *become* a filmmaker and change the way Black communities were represented on screen. Now as an instructor of screenwriting and directing, Dash is able to teach the next generation of filmmakers, to

help nurture and guide their artistic vision. One of her students at Howard University says, "the larger-than-life feeling that Julie created, [that's] trickled down to what … Beyoncé's 'Lemonade' is" (Boston). Another student admits, "We couldn't be here now if it wasn't for the Julies who put in the work for us" (Boston).

When Julie Dash had her daughter, N'zinga, she had already started work on *Daughters of the Dust*, and she had already been working in film for about ten years. And while the birth of her daughter inspired the character of the Unborn Child, it could be *Daughters of the Dust* that helped inspire N'zinga's own career. When N'zinga was going through school, she observed that "no-one else's mother was a filmmaker," and told her mother that she was "crazy" to be a filmmaker (Dash, "Interview"). But now, over two decades later, N'zinga has a career as a post-production supervisor (Dash, "Interview"). When asked if she feels there are now "daughters of *Daughters of the Dust*," Dash says:

> Now there are more women making films and they're getting them out there. It's wonderful. Just by being visible they are making it possible for other people to say, "I could do that – and I could do it better!" That's important too, that vision. What's needed is visibility, but then also recognition of good work being done, and the sharing and promotion of good work. We need to be celebrating and mentoring. ("Interview")

One of the primary goals of the L.A. Rebellion, as I discussed in Chapter 2, was to challenge the images of mainstream cinema and to reimagine and redefine how the Black American experience can be represented on screen. Indeed, Julie Dash and the other members of this Black independent filmmaking movement used their very presence as

filmmakers to dismantle stereotypes and to reframe the future of Black American cinema (Larkin 168). “As Black women film-makers, I and my sisters come with a different vision,” L.A. Rebellion filmmaker Alile Sharon Larkin (1988) declares, “We have many, many stories to retell” (168).

And while it is crucial to shine a light on the revolutionary impact of this group of filmmakers – the L.A. Rebellion – it is important not to look back on this film era as fixed, or complete. There is still much to learn from these filmmakers, their films, and the continued journey of Black America cinema. In the words of Michael Gillespie (2016), “The idea of black film is always a question, never an answer” (16). bell hooks makes a similar call for our approach to Black cinema, suggesting that we can probe deeper if we look beyond categorical boundaries (Dash and hooks 65). In a conversation with Dash, hooks voices her hope that *Daughters of the Dust* – and I would also add, *Illusions* – will be placed critically not only in the context of Black independent filmmaking, but also in the broader world of filmmaking (Dash and hooks 65). After all, as Johnnie Stover (2003) writes, “When the dust has settled, histories, autobiographies, fictions, are all, in effect, just narratives” (36). When we break down arbitrary borders – of film, of literature, and of ‘Others’ – we can begin to ask new questions, and perhaps learn more about the complexities of race, gender, history, and ourselves.

In her now famous poem, Maya Angelou (1978) writes: “You may write me down in history / With your bitter twisted lies / You may trod me in the very dirt / But still, like dust, I’ll rise” (41). Like Angelou, Dash is aware of the misrepresentations of Black Americans across not only the history of film, but across the history of the United States. It is in the (re)writing of history through film that Dash finds a way to reimagine and

redefine the narratives of Black female subjectivity. As we see in the opening and final scenes of *Daughters of the Dust*, it is through the dust – through the critical, cultural, and corporeal connection to the past – that Dash is able to re-present the self and her community through mythical, biographical, and poetic histories. In so doing, she has revolutionized the possibilities of cinematic self-definition, and continues to inspire Black women to rise from the dust, and share the stories that yearn to be told.

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